

RANDOM RENDEZVOUS

ADDICTS of The Pocket Spice-Box will find his latest offering especially appetising, for it marks the opening of a major enterprise: a series of novels devoted to the activities, both intra- and extra-mural, of that human gem of purest ray serene, a Perfect English Gentleman.

Guy Random is the typical Anderson hero coaxed into full blossom: dashing, resourceful, nonchalant, with a touch of piratical ruthlessness under the glossy charm and suave courtesy. By occupation he is a "Professional Negotiator" who excels in "arranging matters," i.e., he will fix anything for anybody—for a suitable fee.

He makes his bow in the temporary guise of a secret agent, arranging matters of the utmost international urgency in the glamorous surroundings of the Spanish Costa Brava. His mission plunges him into a vortex of perils both physical and moral wherein he is greatly aided by Leslie Spindle, a provincial grocer of romantic notions and frustrated fancies. He is equally impeded by the ravishing Fanny Traverse, the volcanic Consuela and the notorious Mrs. Sheath, "luscious as an over-ripe pomegranate," whose smile is "a third-degree burn."

Underlying all is the smouldering mystery of The Tears of Venus, which is not only a mystery but also that very rare thing in humorous fiction: a really new comic device.

By the Same Author

GRIT AND POLISH
PAINLESS EXTRACTIONS
SMILING TIGERS
THORN IN THE FLESH

RANDOM RENDEZVOUS

BY

OLIVER ANDERSON



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1

"FIVE husbands in ten years !"

"Yes, those are the official figures. Actually, she's had three more besides ; but they were foreigners, who don't count of course."

"No, no, quite so." Sir Humphrey Clinker nodded and thoughtfully sipped his pink-gin. "Five in ten years : an impressive tally. Mrs. Sheath must be a very energetic woman."

"And conscientious, too," said Hetty Salt. "One must grant her that. I understand she's established a Home for them down on the Côte d'Azur. As soon as they become obsolete they're withdrawn from active service and dispatched to a luxury villa on Cap Ferrat. They get four square meals a day, plus tobacco money and an invalid-chair apiece. You can't say fairer than that."

"You certainly can't. It must cost her a fortune."

"Oh, I don't know. I gather that by the time she's finished with them their expectation of life is fairly tepid."

Sir Humphrey relaxed on his lounge-chair and contentedly surveyed the splendid gardens of Monk's Frisking manor glowing in the brilliant sunlight. It was five o'clock of a late July afternoon, and now most of the house-party were frolicking in the swimming-pool or basking themselves on the brink.

"You know, Hetty, it's always such a pleasure to slip down here for the week-end. I'm not so young as

I was, and I sometimes wonder how much longer these poor old shoulders will sustain the burdens heaped upon them. But, at Monk's Frisking I can count on finding perfect relaxation: a peaceful atmosphere, charming surroundings and stimulating company."

"When you've met Myra Sheath you may find the company a fraction over-stimulating."

"Come, now. I believe you're trying to frighten me."

"Not at all. I'm just warning you. Myra's effect upon the average male is much the same as the effect of a hormone weedkiller on the average plantain. The victim swells up to double the normal size and then starts to fray at the edges."

"Speaking as a particularly tough old plantain, I can hardly wait."

"Nor need you; because here she comes."

Sir Humphrey glanced over his shoulder and instantly reared up like an inflamed cobra. An expression of utter stupefaction overspread his aquiline features. A violent tremor agitated his lean body. He snatched at the monocle hanging against his chest and clamped it feverishly into his right eye.

Mrs. Sheath was a paralysing brunette in the grand Latin tradition: olive-skinned, arrogantly carnal, luscious as an over-ripe pomegranate. Her blue-black hair, shining with oil, was swept back from her forehead in a breaking wave and loosely knotted on the nape of her neck. Fantastically long black lashes veiled the deep purple wells of her eyes. Her voluptuous half-parted lips were an open cheque on the Bank of Love.

With slow, poised steps she strolled across the lawn towards the pool, followed by a cloud of musky scent and preceded by her celebrated forty-one-inch bust: a wonder of nature which had figured in a dozen best-

sellers, inspired a score of portraits and caused fifty cases of careless driving. She was dressed with studied simplicity in a pair of spike-heeled sandals and two quite useless wisps of satin-lastex.

"And what," enquired Hetty, "do you think of that?"

"I don't," muttered Sir Humphrey. "I just vibrate."

Mrs. Sheath's arrival was the signal for a shameless stampede by the male members of the house-party. She had scarcely extended herself on a rubber mattress by the edge of the pool when she was hemmed in by a triple palisade of dedicated aficionados including a Cabinet Minister, two ornaments of the Household Cavalry, an eminent brain-surgeon, a notorious dress-designer and a television Panel idol who could also read and write.

"And to think," mused Hetty, "that not so many years ago she was dancing in a night-club and two feathers."

"It must," said Sir Humphrey, "have been a very big bird."

By now Mrs. Sheath was completely lost to view, for the first rush of admirers had been reinforced by a dozen late-comers from the pool. These, still dripping with water, were scrambling fretfully around on all-fours, peering between the legs of the ringside spectators, or diving headlong into the general mass like Rugby-football forwards seeking entry into a loose maul.

Sir Humphrey smiled ruefully. "Twenty years ago I'd have been in there myself; *and* in the front row. But at my age, alas, it is wiser to restrict oneself to the pleasures of the imagination."

He sighed and started to light a cigar. Then,

suddenly he dropped the match and pointed urgently to the far side of the pool.

"Who's that fellow over there?"

Hetty smiled fondly. "That? Why, that's the one and only Guy Random. Surely you've met him? Everybody knows Guy. He's a perfect pet."

Sir Humphrey made no reply. His keen gaze was absorbing every detail of the stylish figure lounging with such nonchalant elegance in the depths of a canvas swing-seat. The sprawling limbs had the lithe grace of youth, but the air of easy assurance and effortless superiority indicated a mature man of the world. Somewhere in the late thirties, Sir Humphrey calculated. The smooth fair hair was beautifully barbered and brushed up over the ears in rakish wings. The neat, sharp features were deeply tanned. He was dressed in a pink silk shirt, putty-coloured corduroy trousers, canary-yellow socks and a particularly caddish pair of desert boots. He reclined on his shoulder-blades, with his heels propped on the edge of a garden-table, deeply absorbed in a small leather-bound book.

Presently he glanced up and greeted Hetty with a flashing grin: a grin which revealed a perfect set of teeth and a pair of gin-pickled blue eyes.

"You seem to have found some good reading, Guy."

"Too true. A proper snorter."

"How exciting! What is it?"

"*The Pilgrim's Progress*."

With this, he reached for the gin-bottle standing at his elbow, gulped back a rousing snifter and plunged once more into his book.

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Sir Humphrey. "I wouldn't have believed it possible."

"Guy seems to have made an impression on you," said Hetty.

"I'm more than impressed ; I'm astounded. The man who can lie on his neck, reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*, within scorching-range of Mrs. Sheath is a truly remarkable character."

A moment later it became clear that Sir Humphrey was not alone in his opinion. Mrs. Sheath arose from her mattress, thrust her way through the smouldering ranks of her public and quivered around the edge of the pool.

"Ho ! Ho !" said Hetty. "I had a feeling she wouldn't let him get away with that for very long."

Sir Humphrey leaned forward. "Unless I'm much mistaken she's going to give him the full treatment. I shall observe his reactions with the keenest interest."

A hush fell upon the spectators as Mrs. Sheath reached her objective. Grasping the edge of the table which was supporting Guy's heels, she leaned over him and spoke in a deep husky murmur that seemed to thicken the air with a visible heat-haze.

"Hello, Mr. Random."

Guy paused in the act of turning a page and looked up.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sheath," he replied coolly. And thereupon he buried his nose once more in his book.

"Incredible !" exclaimed Sir Humphrey. "The fellow's not human."

"Perhaps he didn't notice," suggested Hetty.

"What ! Not notice a set of luggage like that ? Why, they'd raise a riot in a mortuary."

For a moment Mrs. Sheath was clearly shaken, but she recovered immediately. Drawing up a wicker armchair, she deployed herself in open formation and returned to the attack.

"Do you mind if I share your shady corner with you, Mr. Random?"

"Not at all."

"It's very hot today, isn't it?"

"Very."

"I'm absolutely sweltering."

"Oh?"

"Yes; even in this teeny-weeny two-piece."

"Indeed?"

Mrs. Sheath stared incredulously at the supine figure in the swing-seat; for during the entire passage of dialogue he had not once raised his eyes from the page. Instead, he had sunk lower and lower on the cushions until all that was visible of his face was a pair of eyebrows locked in a frown of relentless concentration.

Mrs. Sheath's fingers tightened on the arms of her chair.

"I think," she said, "that I should like a drink."

"M'm?"

"I said I should like a drink."

"The tray is beside you."

"Oh . . . so it is. And another thing . . ."

"M'm?"

"I should like a cigarette."

"The box is in front of you."

Mrs. Sheath recoiled. For a moment, she sat quite motionless. Then she took a cigarette, drew her chair still closer and sank her voice to a blistering caress.

"Oh, Mr. Random . . ."

"M'm?"

"There don't seem to be any matches. Will you give me a light, please?"

Without a reply Guy balanced his book on his chest with one hand and slipped the other into his trousers pocket. Mrs. Sheath leaned forward in anticipation,

her enormous eyes shining like wet purple pansies, her rapacious lips shaping a serpent's smile. But her manoeuvre proved fruitless. Her prey merely sank still further into his cushions and vented a peevish "catch!" Whereupon a gold lighter whizzed past her ear and fell with a bitter splash into her glass of gin.

At this Mrs. Sheath's tropical temperament burst into flames. Her eyes narrowed to tiger-slits, she drew in a long shuddering breath and rose to her feet. For a moment it seemed as if she were going to launch herself upon Guy in a violent physical assault. Instead, with the speed and flexibility of a master tactician, she suddenly switched the direction of her attack.

Pressing her hand to her forehead, she staggered back a pace and released her pent-up breath in a low agonising moan.

"Oh dear . . . oh dear . . . I think I'm going to faint . . ."

Guy flung aside his book, leapt up and caught her in his arms as she tottered and sank towards the turf.

"Got him!" exclaimed Sir Humphrey as Guy lowered Mrs. Sheath onto the swing-seat with his arm around her waist. "And very neat too. In the last resort, appeal to the humane instincts. It never fails."

"But perhaps she really is ill," said Hetty, rising to her feet.

Sir Humphrey smiled sardonically and motioned her back into her chair. "Don't be ridiculous, Hetty. Just take a good look at her."

His scepticism seemed justified, for Mrs. Sheath's behaviour was scarcely that of a woman on the point of swooning. Heedless of Guy's repeated exhortations to lean down and put her head between her knees, she was twining herself around him like a kidney-bean

plant on a stake, and panting torridly down the neck-hole of his shirt.

"If he fights his way out of that," said Sir Humphrey, "I shall be very much surprised. You mark my words, he'll find himself in an invalid-chair on Cap Ferrat in next to no time."

But he had failed to reckon with the legendary Random sang-froid. Guy, realising that he had fallen into a trap, reacted promptly and vigorously. Disengaging himself firmly yet courteously from Mrs. Sheath's embrace, he leaned forward and snapped his fingers at Hetty's under-gardener who was trundling a wheelbarrow full of grass-cuttings across the lawn by the swimming-pool.

"Come here, my man! And bring your vehicle with you."

Bewildered but obedient, the adenoidal youth changed direction and plodded up to the swing-seat. As he drew alongside, Guy arose, bent down, lifted Mrs. Sheath bodily off the cushions and dumped her grimly on the bed of grass-cuttings in the barrow. Then he drew himself up and threw out his arm in an imperious gesture.

"Kindly remove that body. Where to is immaterial. But take it away!"

With this, he extended himself once more upon the cushions, picked up *The Pilgrim's Progress* and calmly resumed his reading. At the same time the gardener, completely subdued by Guy's lordly air of command, grasped the handles of his barrow and wheeled the stupefied Mrs. Sheath away across the lawn towards the compost-heap in the back regions.

Hetty gave a delighted chuckle. "And that's Guy Random for you. A pretty cool customer."

"I congratulate you," replied Sir Humphrey, "upon

a masterpiece of understatement. In my opinion, the man who can behave like *that* in the face of a woman like *that* is something more than a cool customer. He's a bloody marvel."

2

"MRS. CONE? Charmed, charmed! This is indeed a pleasure."

Guy bowed over his visitor's hand and pressed his lips to her gloved fingers.

"Pray be seated, dear lady. And allow me to offer you an apéritif. Pernod, of course?"

"Thank you. How did you know?"

"The experience of a lifetime has taught me that ladies with bronze hair and emerald eyes invariably drink Pernod . . . and now I am entirely at your service."

In spite of her glossy sophistication, Mrs. Cone showed signs of uncertainty. Whilst accepting her drink and a cigarette, she covertly inspected the beautifully appointed drawing-room. Then she glanced curiously at Guy who was now sitting opposite to her, his eyebrows raised in courteous inquiry. Through the open windows came the subdued rumble of the traffic passing along Park Lane.

Presently Mrs. Cone put aside her glass. "My friend Rose Cleft advised me to consult you, Mr. Random."

"Ah, yes, to be sure. *Dear Mrs. Cleft. A de-*

lightful person. I was so happy to be of service to her. But then we all have our little troubles, do we not ? ”

“ We do. And I’ve got a big one.” She eyed him narrowly through the smoke-haze. “ Rose tells me that you can fix just about anything.”

Guy winced, and drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. “ Please, please ! ‘ Fix ’ is not a word I much care for. ‘ Negotiate,’ shall we say ? ”

“ All right, if you think it sounds better.”

“ It not only sounds better , it is also more accurate. Because that’s what I am, Mrs. Cone : a Negotiator.”

“ I’ve never heard of it.”

“ Possibly not. Nevertheless, it is a very ancient and honourable occupation . . . especially in the countries of the Middle and Far East. Our Western civilisation, with its brash manners and crude methods, has been less ready to appreciate the value of the skilled Third Party. More’s the pity.”

Guy sipped his gin and flicked a trace of ash from his superb lounge-suit.

“ However, things are improving, I’m happy to say. It’s a small world these days, and we in the West are at last waking up to the fact that we have much to learn from our brothers in the East. There is now a steadily growing demand for the services of the experienced Middleman who can tactfully smooth away the difficulties between conflicting parties, or discreetly establish contact between mutually interested parties. In short : more and more people are realising the value of the man who can *arrange* matters. I make myself clear ? ”

“ Quite, Mr. Random. You are a Negotiator, and you *arrange* matters.” She glanced again around the luxurious drawing-room. “ And judging by your

business premises, an awful lot of people need an awful lot of arranging."

Guy shrugged. "My clients usually seem to appreciate my services. And, though I say it myself, the labourer is worthy of his hire."

"You mean you make them pay through the nose?"

Again Guy winced and shuddered. "Really, Mrs. Cone! However, I won't disguise the fact that my fees are high. And justifiably so. The skilled Negotiator is a man of many parts. He must be an acute psychologist; he must have a wide knowledge of finance, law and commercial practice; he must maintain a vast circle of acquaintance in every walk of life; above all, he must have a great natural talent for personal relations backed-up by the ability to converse fluently in a dozen foreign tongues. To all this he must add energy, perseverance, tact and absolute discretion. These are but a few of the qualifications necessary to a man in my profession. So you will readily understand that . . ."

"Quite," agreed Mrs. Cone. "Rose told me that you charged like hell. But she also told me that you were worth every penny of it."

Guy placed his hand on his breast and bowed. "Your servant, madam. And now, I am yours to command. What seems to be the trouble?"

"My husband."

"Yes, yes, of course. But . . ."

"He won't leave me alone."

"Nor do I blame him, if I may venture to say so."

"I mean *alone*."

"Oh, I see. That's different. Pray go on."

"Well, you see, I have a . . . a friend. And . . ."

Guy held up his hand. "You need say no more, Mrs. Cone. I fully understand. A very vexing state of affairs. And a very common one, too, unfortunately."

But there are always ways and means. Believe me, something can always be arranged."

"Good. And the sooner the better."

Guy replenished the glasses, and leaned back in his chair, joining his finger-tips and staring at the ceiling.

"Now, about how long were you thinking of, Mrs. Cone?"

"If you could get the old man out of the way for a week it would help a lot."

"A week? Are you quite sure that will be enough? Most of my ladies seem to find that a fortnight is more suitable. Just sufficient for a really good change, whilst avoiding any danger of excessive wear and tear."

"You think it could be managed?"

"Of course it can be managed, Mrs. Cone. That's what I'm here for. And now to work! First, a few basic facts. How old is the spouse?"

"Far too old."

"H'm. I see. But he enjoys good health, I fear?"

"He's always saying there's something wrong with him, but actually he's indestructible. Eats like a horse and sleeps like a log."

"How very exasperating."

"Exasperating!" cried Mrs. Cone with sudden petulance. "It's worse than useless!"

Guy leaned forward and patted her hand. "Believe me, dear lady, I sympathise. I do indeed. But there is no cause for despondency. I am confident that we shall be able to arrange matters in next to no time. This tendency to hypochondria that you mention is always very helpful. Now, tell me, who is hubby's quack?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Who is your husband's medical adviser?"

"Sir Walter Penge."

"Sir Walter! But that's quite perfect. Wally and

I have a very practical understanding in these little matters. If you will excuse me one moment, I'll just try to get him on the telephone."

Presently Guy's voice came from the hall through the half-open doorway.

"That you, Wally? Guy Random here. I believe you have a Mr. Cone amongst your customers. Well, listen. His liver's in a shocking state, and it's high time he had a fortnight at Montecatini to get himself swilled out. . . . What? Now don't be difficult, Wally. I tell you his liver is perfectly revolting, and unless he goes for treatment at once he's had his perishing lot as 'ow. . . . What's that? On further reflection you're inclined to agree with my diagnosis? Good. *That's* the idea. And listen, Wally. He must go alone, you understand. No wee wifie. Exactly. . . . She will be otherwise engaged."

There was a pause. Then Guy resumed with a trace of irritation.

"Of course you'll get your percentage. I've never bilked you yet, have I? If you're lunching at the club today, I'll have the cheque ready for you. . . . And see that you put the fear of God into the old gentleman sharpish. My client is getting impatient. . . . Farewell old boy, and many thanks. I'll probably have another little job for you very soon. I hear Jenny Bannister is getting a mite restless."

Guy came back, briskly rubbing his hands. "Well, that's that, Mrs. Cone. Your troubles are over. Sir Walter is most dissatisfied with your husband's liver and is sending him abroad for immediate treatment. What's more, he's going to clap him in a clinic. So you and your friend can look forward with absolute confidence to a fortnight of uninterrupted . . . ah . . . friendship."

"Thank you, Mr. Random. I'm very grateful."

"Pray don't mention it. The pleasure is entirely mine. I handle a great many cases of this kind, and always with a real sense of satisfaction. It is my conviction that the main foundation of a healthy national life is happy family life. It is up to all of us to do what we can to promote it."

"How true," agreed Mrs. Cone. "And now perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what I owe you."

"By all means. There is a standard fee for this type of case. Two hundred guineas."

Mrs. Cone blanched. "Two hundred guineas! I say, that's a bit steep, isn't it?"

Guy raised his eyebrows. "Really, madam, you surprise me! In view of the service I provide, I should have thought it was very reasonable."

"Yes, I know. But two hundred guineas for a three-minute telephone call . . ."

"Not so, madam. Two hundred guineas for twenty years' experience in the art of Negotiation."

"Well, of course, if you look at it that way . . ."

"I do look at it that way, Mrs. Cone. And I sincerely hope that you will, too. Otherwise, I fear, hubby's liver will take a sudden turn for the better."

Mrs. Cone pouted, drew her cheque-book from her handbag, paused and gazed thoughtfully at Guy who, with his customary tact, had moved away to look out of the window whilst his client wrote the cheque.

"Mr. Random!"

"Yes, Mrs. Cone?"

"It has just occurred to me that you probably allow discount."

"Discount?" replied Guy frigidly. "For cash, you mean?"

"Well not cash, exactly."

"Then I'm afraid I don't understand . . ."

There was a rustle of silk and an overpowering gust of *Echo, Troublant*. Guy slowly turned round. His eyebrows 'shot up, his lips tightened and his jaw set sternly. He crossed the room in four strides and pulled the door open.

"I must make myself quite clear, Mrs. Cone. There are two very strict rules which I always observe in my professional dealings. I never allow discount of any kind. And I never mingle pleasure with business. When you are ready I will call a cab for you."

With a sigh of chagrin, Mrs. Cone filled out the cheque and tossed it onto the table.

"I'm ready now," she snapped. "And you can forget about the cab. After paying that fee I can't afford one. For the next six months I shall have to thresh around on my two flat feet."

Guy patted her on the shoulder. "Love is a wonderful thing, Mrs. Cone. We should never grudge the little sacrifices it entails."

She swept past him into the hall, her chin tilted. "You're a heartless money-grubbing brute, that's what you are. And I could spit in your eye."

3

Guy had passed a strenuous morning at the Minerva Club, arranging matters between an eminent theatrical impresario and the Headmaster of a famous public school where the former's fifteen-year-old son was a

pupil. The enterprising lad, it seemed, had persuaded the Headmaster's excitable young wife to appear thrice weekly in a strip-tease act in the senior dormitory after lights-out. (Admission five shillings a head : champagne and caviare sandwiches extra).

The negotiations had proved long and bitter, the Headmaster threatening to curtail his wife's activities on the ground that, at a guinea-a-peel, she was clearly a victim of sweated labour. This the impresario had hotly denied, threatening to bring an action on his son's behalf for breach of contract.

In the end a compromise had been achieved. The performance would continue, but at an increased fee of thirty-shillings-a-strip and two guineas on Sundays. As against this, the Headmaster would detail the string section of the school orchestra to provide musical accompaniment to the entertainment, free of charge.

Not surprisingly, Guy had experienced the greatest difficulty in securing his own fee of one hundred guineas ; having been obliged, indeed, to threaten both parties with a lurid exposure of the situation in the popular Sunday press.

Strolling home after luncheon he felt weary and irritable, and for want of something better to do he turned into his neighbourhood cinema, a small luxury theatre specialising in foreign films and noted for the comfort of its seats. For ten minutes he gloomily watched the usual mixture of tropical passion and moral torments. Then he slipped down in his seat and sank into a doze.

He was roused by a slight tug at the left-hand pocket of his coat. Keeping perfectly still, he glanced cautiously out of the corner of his eye. The seat beside him, previously empty, was now occupied by a bulky female figure wearing a shapeless felt hat, a shabby tweed suit

and a pair of sun-glasses. He caught a glimpse of rouge-raddled cheeks, and an untidy bun of white hair. Was this extraordinary creature trying to pick his pocket? He closed his eyes and waited.

Presently he again felt a tweaking on his left flank ; and this time, fully awake, he realised what was happening. His neighbour was not trying to take anything out of his pocket ; instead, she was trying to push something into it. A moment later she began to gather up handbag, gloves and red silk parasol, preparing to leave. At the same time Guy noticed something very interesting : her legs. They were the slim rounded limbs of a young woman.

He did not hesitate. Here was a provoking little mystery, and he intended to get to the bottom of it. He leaned across and spoke in a sharp menacing whisper.

“ You will come along with me, madam. And I don’t want any argument ; otherwise I shall send for the manager and give you in charge for attempting to pick my pocket. Get moving, now ! And no nonsense.”

Ten minutes later, Guy’s prisoner was standing in the middle of his drawing-room divesting herself of her disguise, and thereby revealing herself as Miss Lucy Bunting, the most photographed débutante of the current London season. She tossed aside her fantastic hat and white wig ; then, raising her skirts to her arm-pits, she set about freeing herself of her false hips : a sizeable pillow secured to her person by an intricate system of tapes and buckles. This done, she sighed with relief, shook out her red curls and sank into an armchair.

Guy gave her a glass of gin and eyed her coolly. “ And now, Miss Bunting, I really think that you owe me an explanation. I don’t want to seem inquisitive, but I should very much like to know why you are

padding round London disguised as a fat lady, and why you were so anxious to deposit this cryptic message in my coat-pocket. 'You must agree that it's all a little odd.'

Lucy avoided his glance and fiddled with her cigarette.

"Sorry. I can't tell you."

"You mean you refuse to tell me?"

"Put it that way, if you like."

"Aren't you being rather foolish?"

"What do you mean?"

Guy leaned forward with his most persuasive smile.

"Listen to me, Miss Bunting. It is obvious that you are engaged in some mysterious activity which you wish to keep secret. Well, if you are a sensible girl and take me into your confidence, the matter will remain a secret—between the two of us."

"And if I don't?"

Guy shrugged and tapped the sheet of cheap writing-paper lying on his knee.

"I am a man with a very wide circle of acquaintance, Miss Bunting, including numerous friends in the newspaper world. You are a young woman much in the public eye. Your extraordinary behaviour this afternoon would make very juicy reading."

Lucy sat up so sharply that she slopped half her gin into her lap.

"You mean you'd spill this to the press?"

"Precisely; and I shall let them have this peculiar document for publication . . . unless, of course, we can arrive at an amicable understanding."

Lucy was plainly much disturbed. She finished her drink at a single gulp and dragged feverishly at her cigarette. Meanwhile she glanced at Guy with mingled alarm and revulsion. He pressed home his advantage.

"Now, come, Miss Bunting. Why not be reasonable?"

You've made a bad blunder, and there's only one way of retrieving it. Confide your secret to me, and not another soul shall know about it."

Lucy eyed him narrowly. "And why should I trust you to keep your word?"

"For two reasons. First, because my name is Random. Second, because you really haven't any choice."

Lucy got up and began to pace the carpet. Presently she halted, heaved a deep sigh and ran her hand through her cap of red curls.

"Oh, well. There doesn't seem any way out of it. I suppose I shall have to tell you. The fact is, I'm a secret agent."

"Good God Almighty! Don't tell me you're employed by M.I.5?"

Lucy shrugged disdainfully. "Lord, no. I work for The Shadow. We look after the really important stuff."

"The Shadow? What on earth do you mean?"

"That's what we call the head of our organisation; and don't ask me who he is, because I don't know."

"Come, come, Miss Bunting. Really now . . ."

"It's a fact. Nobody knows anybody in our outfit. You just hear a voice on the telephone giving you a rendezvous, and you go along there and some character slips you your instructions for your next job. I was briefed for this little party by a chap disguised as a bishop, in the National Gallery. Rather a careless type, I'm sorry to say. No real bishop would behave like that in front of the Rokeby "Venus." At least I hope not."

Guy puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "An interesting state of affairs, I must say. And this message, presumably, is from The Shadow? Can you throw any light on it?"

"I haven't seen it yet. It was handed to me in a sealed envelope. What does it say?"

Guy rubbed his chin and raised his eyebrows. "It says: '*The Pilgrim's Progress* starts at 9.0 p.m. . . . And then there are two rows of figures. . . . Here, see if you can make anything of it.'"

Lucy leaned over his shoulder. "Why, its obvious. Those figures are map co-ordinates. It's an order for a rendezvous. You've got to be at this place, wherever it is, at nine o'clock tonight. But what the bit about *The Pilgrim's Progress* means I can't imagine."

"I think perhaps I can," replied Guy. "Unless I'm much mistaken, it means that The Shadow has a surprisingly detailed knowledge of my private life. *The Pilgrim's Progress* happens to be my favourite bedside reading."

He got up and went to the door. "There's more in this than meets the eye, Miss Bunting. Excuse me whilst I get my maps."

"Then you'll keep the rendezvous?" said Lucy with a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad. I should hate to think I'd dropped a clanger on my first job."

"Certainly, I shall keep it. I don't know what's behind all this nonsense, but I frankly admit that you've properly tickled my fancy. And when that happens to a Random he can never resist scratching it."

At nine o'clock Guy stopped his black Bristol at a frowsy all-night transport-café on the outskirts of a sizeable village on the Great North Road. If his map-reading were accurate, this should be his rendezvous.

The place was crowded with long-distance lorry drivers, but Guy managed to wedge himself into a

quiet corner with a double helping of steak-and-chips and a mug of fierce sweet tea.

When he had taken the edge off his hunger he began to examine the other customers. He had no difficulty at all in identifying his "contact." A willowy young man was standing at the counter in a disguise even more inept than Miss Lucy Bunting's had been. He wore a brand-new cloth cap and mechanic's overalls, both very unconvincingly daubed with grease. He was beautifully shaved and elaborately barbered ; his hands were lily white. He was sipping his tea spinster-fashion, his little finger delicately crooked ; and he was smoking a Turkish cigarette in a long ivory holder.

Presently he caught Guy's glance, waggled his eyebrows conspiratorially and undulated across the room. Pulling up a chair, he spoke with slowmincing precision.

"What . . . cheer . . . chum !"

"Wotcher, mate," replied Guy expertly.

"It is bloody hot—I mean 'ot—is it not ?"

"Aye. Muckin' warm," agreed Guy.

"What about—I mean abart—another cup of tea ?"

"You mean : Wot abart another cupper char."

The young man sighed pcevisly. "I'm afraid I'm not much good at this lingo. And I've been practising like anything."

"Forget about it," advised Guy. "And if I were you I'd get rid of that damn silly outfit you're wearing. It's not doing you the slightest good. I recognised you the moment I set eyes on you."

"Oh, no!"

Guy shrugged. "Name, Peter Folly. Occupation, society photographer. And don't waste breath denying it, because I spent several hours in the same room with you last week at Ursula Vervain's snakes-and-ladders party."

Peter looked very dejected. "Oh, dear. I *never* seem to be able to conceal my identity. That's what comes of having such a forceful personality."

"Never mind," said Guy. "We've made contact, and that's the main thing. Have you got any instructions for me?"

"Yes. You are to proceed forthwith to Little Pittle."

"Don't be ridiculous. This is only my first cup."

"You misunderstand me. It's a place. A village in East Elmshire."

"Oh, I see. How far?"

"About fifty miles, I believe. I've got a map all ready marked up for you."

"Thanks, but I prefer to use my own. I've no desire to find myself in a malarial swamp in the Belgian Congo. And then?"

"You are to proceed to the Rectory, and ask for the Reverend Homer Hassock."

"For whom?"

"The Reverend Homer Hassock."

Guy put down his mug. "Look here, Folly, I have a fairly elastic sense of fun, but . . ."

He broke off as Peter crouched towards him, venting a melodramatic hiss. "Pssst! I must leave you."

"But why?"

Peter gestured covertly towards a slatternly young blonde who had just entered the café and joined a bunch of lorry-men.

"One can't be too careful. See the shape of her skull? Slavonic extraction, unless I'm much mistaken. Probably one of *theirs*."

"Whose?"

"Pssst!"

Guy wiped the spit out of his eye and watched Peter endeavouring to mingle nonchalantly with the crowd

at the tea-counter. The manoeuvre was wholly unsuccessful. His exaggerated rendering of a stage spy's slinking gait speedily attracted the attention of the entire clientele, plus a number of wolf-whistles and rude sucking noises.

A few minutes later Guy finished his meal and waved a cheerful farewell to his colleague who replied with a mysterious counter-sign akin to the motions of milking a cow. After a careful study of his maps he turned off the Great North Road on the far side of the village and set course for Little Pittle in the green depths of East Anglia.

At eleven o'clock, after threading a maze of narrow lanes, he drove into a tiny hamlet nestling in a wooded bowl at the foot of a steep hill. The glare of his headlights picked up a bearded figure slumped on a wooden seat on the village green. He stopped and enquired for the Rectory.

"The Rect'ry, mester? Fust on yer left, second on yer roight. Yer can't miss it. . . ." The hairy ancient broke off to cackle lewdly. "Theer's 'ell on oop theer ternoight."

"Indeed? What do you mean, there's hell on?"

"Whoy, boozin' an' dancin' an' oorin' regardless."

"You don't say so?"

"It's roight, mester. You goo on oop theer an' see fer yer-sen. Boozin' an' dancin' an' . . ."

"Thank you," said Guy, engaging the clutch. "Your point is taken. I will indeed goo up there and see for me-sen."

Followed by another lascivious whinny, he drove on and presently turned through a pillared gateway into a winding drive flanked by overhanging trees.

In due course the drive straightened out to reveal a vast stone mansion fronted by a gravel sweep packed

with cars. Every room was brilliantly lighted, and from open french windows giving onto the lawn there came a torrent of chatter and coarse merriment. A radiogram was thumping out West Indian dance rhythms, punctuated by shrill female squeals and the regular crash of splintering glass.

Guy mounted the front-door steps and tugged at the massive bell-pull. His ring was answered by a white-jacketed manservant.

"My name is Random. I believe the Rector is expecting me."

"Certainly, sir. Please come this way."

Guy was shown into a cosy book-lined study. A wood fire was glowing in the hearth, and through the open window came the cloying scent of tobacco-flower and night-stock. After a brief interval the door quietly opened to reveal a tall, slim figure in clerical evening clothes.

Guy leapt to his feet. "Sir Humphrey Clinker !"

"The same, my dear fellow. Sir Humphrey Clinker, alias The Shadow, and currently the Reverend Homer Hassock. I apologise for bringing you so far out of town, but I find it prudent to shift my headquarters and change my identity fairly frequently. So when my old college chum, Canon Crypt, went off for his annual holiday, I decided to do locum tenens for him. My sermons, I'm happy to report, are highly esteemed by the local peasantry."

When they had settled down to their cigars and brandy, Sir Humphrey lay back in his chair and gave Guy a quizzical smile.

"Well, Mr. Random, I've no doubt you're a bit puzzled by all this carry-on."

"I'm more than puzzled, sir. I'm completely baffled. Quite frankly, you're the very last person I'd

have expected to find mixed-up in all this cloak-and-dagger stuff. It doesn't quite seem to harmonise with your public reputation as an eminent financier and discriminating patron of the arts."

Sir Humphrey chuckled and blew a smoke-ring. For several moments he remained silent. Then he leaned forward and tapped Guy on the knee.

"Mr. Random, I have decided to take you entirely into my confidence. I owe you an explanation, and you shall have a full one. Rather more than a year ago I was summoned to attend a Cabinet meeting where a very remarkable proposition was put to me. I was invited to organise and direct an entirely new intelligence department designed to gather information about the military preparations of a certain foreign power—especially with regard to the development of secret weapons."

"But, surely . . ."

Sir Humphrey held up his hand. "Quite. I know what you're going to say. And up to a point you are right. Our existing Secret Service is undoubtedly a useful organisation in so far as it goes. But the Government felt that there was an urgent need for a—how shall I put it—a more specialised outfit to deal with the really important stuff."

"I see."

"And they were so flattering as to invite me to handle the matter."

"A compliment indeed."

Sir Humphrey nodded. "Yes. And I think I can justly claim to have made a pretty good job of it. During its comparatively brief existence, my department has achieved some remarkable results ; very remarkable indeed."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

The sarcastic note in Guy's voice was not lost upon Sir Humphrey who looked up sharply.

"You sound a trifle sceptical, Mr. Random."

"I am."

"May I ask why?"

"You have been frank with me, Sir Humphrey. I will be equally frank with you. What I have seen of your organisation, so far, does not impress me. In fact, it strikes me, quite simply, as a pathetic and puerile farce. First, I am contacted by two of your agents whose childish ineptitude had to be seen to be believed. Their disguises would have disgraced a nursery charade party, and their general technique would have brought tears to the eyes of a troop of Brownies."

"Go on, Mr. Random. And secondly?"

"And secondly, sir, I find that the Director of the organisation chooses to call himself The Shadow; and, for reasons which pass my comprehension, tries to pass himself off as a country clergyman under the title of the Reverend Homer Hassock. In view of all this, can you blame me for doubting the value of your achievements? Forgive me if I seem offensive, but I feel it is as well to speak my mind at the outset. I am a very busy man; and, quite candidly, I am not prepared to waste my time playing the fool."

There was a considerable pause. Then, to Guy's astonishment, Sir Humphrey patted him on the shoulder with a genial smile.

"Thank you, Random. What you have just said affords me the greatest satisfaction. Clearly, my cover-organisation is giving the right impression."

Guy blinked. "Your what? I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"Then, I'll explain. All this cloak-and-dagger stuff, as you call it, is a deliberate blind intended to put the

enemy off the scent—you know whom I mean by the enemy?"

"I can guess."

"They," as you know, regard us as a nation of frivolous degenerates. Therefore, I have provided them with what they expect: an intelligence organisation which, as you so aptly phrase it, is a pathetic and puerile farce. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"Behind this burlesque façade I have set up my real outfit. And that, if I may say so, is another kettle of fish altogether—just about the smoothest little team of security busters in the business."

There was another long silence. Then Guy put aside his cigar and brandy.

"May I ask, Sir Humphrey, why you have chosen to tell me all this? Why you have divulged this most secret information to a man whom you scarcely know?"

"For two reasons. First, because I know a great deal more about you than you imagine. Second, because you will very shortly be working for my organisation."

"What!"

"Exactly that, Random. I need your services."

"But . . ."

"And, what is more important, your country needs them. Yes, my boy, work of the most urgent national importance is awaiting you. And we have only to turn the pages of history to learn that no Random has ever failed to answer his country's call to duty. Am I not right?"

Guy scowled. "As a matter of fact, you are. We always were a packet of patriotic softies. It started at the Battle of Hastings, and it's gone on ever since. More's the pity."

"Then you'll join us?"

"I suppose so. Though what use I shall be to you I can't imagine, what with my sedentary habits and homely tastes."

"On the contrary, Random, you have just the qualities needed for our work. You are intelligent, persevering and completely unscrupulous. You have a profound knowledge of human nature, a marked gift for improvisation and a notable talent for foreign languages. Above all, you are sex-proof."

"I beg your pardon?"

Sir Humphrey made a soothing gesture. "Don't misunderstand me. What I mean is, you are one of those very rare men who can put sex in its place—and keep it there."

"Well, if you don't, you never get on with your work."

"Precisely. The first time I ever clapped eyes on you, Random, was at Monk's Frisking, last week. I was immensely impressed. The work you were engaged upon that afternoon was reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And you *got on with it*—in spite of the most disturbing distractions. I refer to Mrs. Sheath."

Guy pursed his lips. "Mrs. Sheath? Oh, yes. I remember. A fine big girl."

"A fine big girl indeed. And just the sort of thing that plays havoc in our line of business."

Guy raised his eyebrows ironically. "You mean the exotic femme fatale, I suppose, who seduces the secret agent in a Tangier night-box and lures him . . ."

Sir Humphrey laughed and threw out his hands. "No, no, Random. Nothing so melodramatic as that. I simply mean that my men are only human, after all. When a young fellow is sent abroad with unlimited funds, he's apt to confuse business with pleasure. The results can be very disconcerting. Take Basil Chancery,

for example. A capital man in many ways, but he let me down very badly on his last mission. I sent him off to investigate a little matter concerning germ-warfare. Six months later he came back with a horrifying account of a mass-destruction weapon based upon an entirely revolutionary method of spreading the Black Death. Fortunately, before reporting to the Cabinet, I checked his story carefully. I discovered that Chancery had got no farther than Dieppe. There his attention had been diverted by an amiable young widow who ran a home-laundry. He had spent the entire six months turning her mangle."

Sir Humphrey replenished the glasses. "That's the sort of thing I'm up against, Random. And that's why I'm so eager to enlist your services. The man who can ignore Mrs. Sheath in the nude is not likely to dally with a mangle in Dieppe . . ."

There was a sudden vicious crack from the darkness outside the study window, and the glass which Sir Humphrey was just raising to his lips shattered into a thousand fragments.

When, some moments later, he had finished barring the heavy wooden shutters across the window, he moved to the chimney-piece and coolly examined a splintered hole in the woodwork.

"It's, h'm. Quite a close thing. It would appear that *somebody* is beginning to take my organisation seriously—in spite of our amateur methods. Now, perhaps, you will understand . . ."

"What I very clearly understand," replied Guy, "is why the man Chancery transferred his attentions to mangling. A bit humdrum, perhaps, but a rather better expectation of life—however amiable the widow."

"Perhaps you would like to reconsider my in-

vation," suggested Sir Humphrey gently. "You're not committed to anything yet, you know."

Guy's jaw hardened. "I would remind you, sir, that my name is Random. And during the past nine hundred years no Random has ever died in his bed—though not a few have died in other people's. I see no reason for breaking that tradition. When you need my services, they are yours to command."

"I need them at once."

"You do? What's on?"

"I don't know. That is for you to find out."

"Well, really . . ."

Sir Humphrey held up his hand. "I will try to explain the situation as briefly as possible. Two months ago I received a message from one of my most trusted agents, informing me that he had got wind of something of the most vital importance and that he was beginning investigations forthwith. I heard nothing more until yesterday, when I learned that his body had been picked up from the sea by a fishing-vessel off San Felipe del Mar on the Costa Brava. He was fully clothed. His money and personal valuables were untouched. There was a terrible knife wound in his back. That is all I know."

The ash fell off Guy's cigar. "And where do I come in?"

The conversational tone in Sir Humphrey's voice was replaced by a curt note of command.

"You start for San Felipe the day after tomorrow, Random. Henry Salt was on to something. Something so big that he got a knife in his back. I want to know what that something is. And the quicker the better. Any questions?"

"Yes. What's the pay?"

"My agents are not paid. They have an unlimited expenses account. They seem to prefer it that way."

"And so do I. What about my visa and so forth?"

"Everything is arranged."

"What facilities have you laid-on? I suppose I fly to Barcelona and . . ."

"You will do nothing of the kind. You will have no special facilities. You will go in as an ordinary second-class tourist. Your tickets and a month's hotel accommodation have been booked through the Sun Spot travel agency."

"That's a bit rough, isn't it? I mean to say, I do like my modes! home comforts."

"So I understand. And in your case I have made a big concession. A couchette has been reserved for you on the night train from Paris."

"Obliged, I'm sure. If I'm not careful you'll be turning me into a regular milk-sop."

Sir Humphrey stood up and crushed out his cigar. "By the way, Random, I understand you worked with the Maquis in France during the war. No doubt you're handy with a gun."

"Thank you, but I prefer the knife. I have never felt really at home with fire-arms since my first shooting-party when I bagged two beaters and a duchess with a single barrel."

"Well, knives seem quite the thing where you're going, my dear fellow; so you should find the sport to your taste. But do be careful you don't cut your fingers."

He adjusted his clerical collar and smoothed his silk waistcoat. "And now, perhaps, you would care to join our little party. The . . . er . . . friend I have staying with me here has invited a few people down for the week-end, and there'll probably be trouble if I don't show myself and do the civil thing."

The study door burst open with a tremendous crash.

"Humpty! What the hell are you mucking about at? We've run out of gin. . . . Why, Mr. Random! What a pleasant surprise."

Guy bowed profoundly. "Good evening, Mrs. Cone. I trust everything has turned out satisfactorily?"

"Perfectly, thank you. I'm most grateful."

"You are? I must confess I had my doubts."

"Oh? But why?"

"Your cheque, Mrs. Cone. It bounced."

"Oh, no!"

"But, yes. Like anything. In fact, it's still way up there."

There was an awkward silence. Then Sir Humphrey patted Guy's shoulder.

"Don't give it a second thought, Random. Just slip it into your first week's expenses-sheet under 'Miscellaneous.'"

4

Guy reached Victoria Station at 7.30 a.m. He was feeling very low. Normally he never ventured out of bed before ten o'clock, and then only to begin a cautious two-hour convalescence supported by black coffee and *The Times*. Now he was having his first taste of the rigorous life of the secret agent. The grey chill of an English summer morning seeped into his bones, there was a nagging ache behind his eyes, and his skin did not fit.

He wavered feebly towards the boat-train platform, carrying his single bag. Sir Humphrey had been most insistent about the necessity for cutting a modest figure. "It's no good your traipsing round Europe with a mountain of luggage, a Wykehamist tie, a bowler hat and an umbrella like a fencing foil. You must try to be inconspicuous, Random, and learn to mingle freely with the middle classes. I suggest a rather fancy pair of flannels, a coloured waistcoat and one of those nasty double-breasted blazers. You might add a neatly folded raincoat and the neckwear of a minor public-school or mediocre infantry regiment. A shoddy suitcase mounted upon a pair of little wheels is *de rigueur*." Guy had compromised with a sober grey flannel suit, a massive golfing umbrella-cum-scatstick and a pigskin grip.

Several dozen persons were standing in a queue by the platform barrier, their luggage plastered with gaudy Sun Spot labels. These must be his fellow travellers. He sidled up in rear and inspected them with a keen sense of depression. They were nearly all women, and with his practised Negotiator's eye he speedily divided them into three groups : naive little business girls eager for Southern romance ; intellectual spinsters eager to broaden their minds ; and giddy suburban matrons eager to broaden other people's. There was nothing here to ignite the man who had proved himself fireproof against the incendiary charms of Mrs. Sheath and Mrs. Conc.

The twittering harem was being marshalled by a slick young fellow with a flashing smile and a vaguely middle-European accent. In spite of the early morning chill, he was already stripped for action, wearing a neat suit of khaki-drill with a short-sleeved bush-jacket.

Presently he caught sight of Guy crouching squaw-

fashion on his grip ; a spectacle which clearly disturbed him. He advanced with gestures of encouragement.

“ Cheer up, sir ! Your first time abroad, perhaps ? Well, there’s nothing to worry about, not a thing. Just you leave everything to me. I’ve been on this tour for five years now, and I’ve never lost a passenger or a single piece of luggage. Allow me . . . it helps us to keep tab on our customers when there’s a rush on.”

With this, he whipped a brightly coloured label from his pocket and sought to attach it to Guy’s lapel. Recoiling sharply, Guy uttered a cry of protest. This was too much. He had already submitted to numerous indignities in the service of Sir Humphrey Clinker, even to wearing the neck-tie of an obscure line-regiment. But to be docketed like a slave-labourer, like an animated postal-package . . .

Then his sense of duty reasserted itself. He had taken the job on, and he would have to go through with it. “ You must try to be inconspicuous, Random, and learn to mingle freely with the middle classes.” He closed his eyes, advanced his chest and suffered himself to be ticketed.

At the same moment he was startled by a serpentine hiss in his right ear.

“ Pssst ! ”

He sprang to his feet and whirled around. It was Miss Lucy Bunting disguised as a nun.

As she led him aside from the queue, Guy observed that her attention to detail was even more sketchy than usual ; the effect of her nun’s habit being largely nullified by nylon stockings, four-inch heels, varnished finger-nails and a pungent reek of *Vierge Folle*.

She grasped his arm and breathed hotly down his neck. “ Have a care ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

"That smooth type in the bush-jacket who was trying to get into conversation with you. He's almost certainly one of *theirs*."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's the courier fellow who's looking after the party."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I ought to be. He's just tied this degrading label on me."

"Oh, I say, how sweet! You do look a little ducky. Like a wee lost orphan or . . ."

"I don't know what I *look* like, but I *feel* like a bloody fool. What do you want?"

"I have a message for you. Some last-minute instructions from The Shadow. Here!"

She hitched up her skirts and fumbled in a canvas purse-pocket secured by tapes around her waist. As Guy took the familiar buff envelope he heard his name being called.

"Mr. Random! Hurry along, please. The train is waiting!"

Lucy squeezed his hand emotionally. "Well, my boy, this is it. And jolly good luck to you."

"Thanks."

"And remember! Whatever they do to you, don't talk. Death before dishonour! I meant to bring you a suicide pill in case things get too bad, but I find I've brought an aspirin instead."

"For God's sake, give it to me," cried Guy. "What with early rising, hissing nuns and fancy labels, I'm just one big exposed nerve."

He snatched up his bag and dashed along the platform in pursuit of his party. A few minutes later the train started, and he realised with a sudden spurt of excitement that his career as a secret agent had at last really begun.

When breakfast was served he astonished himself by devouring a big one. It was many a long year since he had been able to face anything more substantial than dry toast and coffee before noon. The meal and the aspirin settled his morning sickness and dispersed his headache. He lit his pipe, settled back against the cushions and, with a keen sense of anticipation, opened his final instructions from The Shadow. They were headed : Most Urgent. Action this Day.

" My Dear Random,

You will have three hours in Paris, so please slip along to Gilberte's in the Place Vendôme and buy a Flikflex girdle for Mrs. Cone. I find it's her birthday tomorrow, and I am eager to present her with a token of my affection and esteem. Basil Chancery, who is on his way home from Istanbul, has been notified to meet you at the Gare d'Austerlitz and take delivery. You will identify yourself by tucking the bottoms of your trousers into the tops of your socks. I trust you will have an agreeable stay in the Sunny South. Very sincerely yours, The Shadow.

P.S. I haven't stated the measurements because you wouldn't believe them. Just mention Mrs. Cone, and Gilberte will do the rest. Charge to my account there. Burn this immediately."

The other people at Guy's table were now dozing gently, so he reached across from his aisle seat, stuffed the message into the ashtray under the window, and set fire. He watched with satisfaction as the slip of paper was reduced to ashes. There was no doubt about it, he was getting into the swing of things. Sir Humphrey, he felt sure, would have approved of his prompt discreet methods.

Then he became aware that he was being scrutinised from the table to his right. The fat man who had been

sitting immediately across the aisle had disappeared, thereby exposing the occupant of the window-seat. Guy instantly noticed that she was a proper little ravishment, and that she was inspecting him with unabashed curiosity.

Veiled by a screen of pipe-smoke, he made a swift reconnaissance. Dark chestnut curls, flaring turquoise eyes, lips designed for vacuum-sealed kisses and the destruction of happy homes. Her figure, admirably displayed by a severely styled suit, was of the type which particularly appealed to Guy's somewhat oriental tastes : a girlishly fragile bone-structure combined, perversely, with the full-blown curves of maturity.

She put aside her newspaper and produced a gold cigarette case. The opportunity was obvious. Guy struck a match and leaned across the aisle.

"Allow me."

"Thank you. I seem to have mislaid my own. I must remember to get some when we reach Folkestone . . . that is if I'm on the Folkestone train, which I'm rather beginning to doubt."

"Oh, really? But why?"

"I've a feeling that I may have got on to the Orient Express by mistake."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"Well, you know what I mean : the lone wolf travelling light with only one bag, and carefully burning his correspondence as soon as he's read it."

"I see."

"Though I must say you're not very thorough in your work."

"No?"

"No. In the novels and films they always burn their

papers in the W.C. and flush the ashes down the drain. You must try harder."

She inhaled deeply and blew a perfect smoke-ring. "And another thing. If I were you I'd get rid of that silly little label in your buttonhole."

"I'm not allowed to. It's my party-member's badge."

"Quite so. And a conducted party is scarcely your background. You stick out like a prima donna's bust."

Guy was bitterly chagrined. He was seeking for some apt retort when the fat man bustled down the aisle and resumed his seat, thereby chopping off the conversation.

When the train reached Folkestone, Guy snatched up his bag, determined to intercept the young woman when they alighted and re-establish contact. But he had reckoned without the Sun Spot courier. As he made for the carriage door, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Kindly wait for the rest of the party, Mr. Random. There is no hurry. We will stand-by until the other passengers get clear, and then proceed in our own group. By that means we avoid losing anybody."

Guy's immediate inclination was to advise the young man to go and get stuffed. But again his sense of duty intervened. Sir Humphrey had given his orders and they must be obeyed unquestioningly. When at last he was permitted to get out of the train, all he could glimpse of his quarry was a pair of sumptuous hips rotating lusciously under a tight skirt in the far distance.

The cross-channel boat was very crowded, but Guy was prepared to scour the vessel from deck to keel to find his little seduction. Once 'more, however, he was thwarted by the lynx-eyed courier. Thrice he set off on a tour of inspection, and thrice he was hauled back

before he had gone a dozen paces. In the end he admitted defeat and resigned himself to a gloomy brandy-session at the bar.

At Boulogne he allowed himself to be shepherded through the Customs and onto the Paris train without causing any further trouble. Nevertheless, as he stood in the corridor waiting for the train to start, he could not help sympathising with his colleague Basil Chancery who had gone astray in Dieppe. Clearly, this type of work was fraught with unexpected hazards and grievous temptations.

Then something occurred which brought him down to earth with a jolt, and very effectively diverted his mind from the lusts of the flesh.

A hearty old lady with a basket of bananas on her arm had stopped outside the window at which he was standing and, with raucous Gallic perseverance, was urging him to buy. When he shook his head she still persisted, thrusting a couple of bananas towards him with an earthy jest on the usual subject. Guy could not help laughing, and replied in kind; with the result that he had very soon bought the fruit, which he did not particularly want, at an outrageous price.

The coach reserved for the Sun Spot party was at the forward end of the train, clear of the platform, and a number of seagulls were swooping around amongst the sidings and ramshackle hutments. Guy watched their graceful gyrations as he absent-mindedly peeled a banana. Then, as one of the birds planed down towards the train, he broke off a chunk of fruit and threw it up into the air. The gull dived with unerring precision, snapped up the morsel and swerved away. A moment later he was astounded to see it check in full flight, lurch helplessly and plummet down into an empty coal-wagon as if hit by a rifle bullet.

For several moments Guy stood staring at the half-peeled fruit in his hand. Then, as the train started, he flung both bananas savagely out of the window ; after which he went to the lavatory and carefully washed his fingers.

When, back in his compartment, he filled and lit his pipe, he noticed that his hands were trembling perceptibly. Someone was indeed beginning to take Sir Humphrey Clinker's organisation seriously.

Throughout the journey to Paris, he brooded upon his narrow escape, and it was not until the train drew into the Gare du Nord that he remembered Mrs. Cone's birthday present. In the turmoil on the platform he managed to slip away from the Sun Spot party and, springing into a taxi, he drove to Gilberte's in the Place Vendôme.

There he was warmly received. Mrs. Cone, it appeared, was one of the most valued of their English customers, and they would be delighted to charge the matter to Sir Humphrey's account. The Flikflex girdle was speedily parcelled up, and Guy drove on to the Gare d'Austerlitz, not forgetting to tuck his trousers ends into his socks.

He had scarcely got out of his cab when the customary "Pssst !" exploded in his ear. He wheeled about to face a burly young man with an amiable grin, hairy tweeds and an Old Etonian tie.

"Hello, Random. Chancery at your service. You can adjust your dress now. You look as if you'd been ~~out~~ for a bicycle ride and forgotten your clips. I understand you have a little something for me to deliver to The Shadow.

Guy handed over the parcel. "This is it. Most urgent. Action this day."

"Good. I'll see to it. Forgive me if I dash along

rightaway, but I haven't much time before my plane leaves, and there's a little widow awaiting my attention in the rue de l'Université. I've been a mite lonesome in Istanbul. I never could stand Turkish delight."

"Jolly good luck to you. And mind you don't get mangle-elbow."

"No fear of that, my dear chap. This one's all-electric—though I don't say but what I might blow a fuse. Farewell, and good hunting."

The cab drove off, and Guy turned into the station. That was that : another successful step in his career as a secret agent. Sir Humphrey's outfit was a real pleasure to work for. Under its burlesque façade it functioned with a beautiful smooth precision.

Although there was still two hours to go before departure time, the train was already in. He therefore located his reserved seat, dumped his grip and strolled across to the station restaurant for dinner. There he found the bulk of the Sun Spot party who, having crossed the city by bus, had arrived only a few minutes before himself. He had not, apparently, been missed.

He did not linger over his meal, and after buying a few comforts for the night he went back to the train, intending to relax for a while before the journey started. The platform was still pretty well deserted, but as he approached his coach he became aware of a rising din of conversation reinforced by volleys of released champagne corks.

When he reached his compartment his immediate impression was of a Babylonian orgy on the stroke of chucking-out time. A score of assorted bodies were jammed into the confined space, some sprawling on the seats, some squatting on the floor, others overlaid, prone or supine, on the general mass. A great many foreign languages were being spoken with a wealth of

gesture and an ungrudging expenditure of saliva. There was a noteworthy exhibition of expensive suitings, jewelled cuffs-link, jutting breasts and silk-sheathed thighs. The atmosphere was a lush blend of tobacco smoke, steaming skin, thick scent and amorous investigation.

As he paused on the threshold, he was greeted by a robust American blonde in whose lap was wedged an outrageously beautiful youth whom Guy instantly recognised as a celebrated French night-club singer. The blonde clutched him to her pinnacles with a yell of triumph.

"Look what I got!" she exclaimed. "Isn't he a little sweetie-pie?"

"Uncommonly toothsome," agreed Guy, draping himself against the doorpost. "I congratulate you. Have you any idea, by the way, who all these people are?"

"Not a notion. I just got swept up in the Ritz."

"I see. Well, it all seems very enjoyable, anyway."

"I'm not enjoying myself."

"Indeed? I'm sorry to hear that. Of course one has to be in the right mood for this type of entertainment."

"I'm in the mood all right; but I can't remember the French for 'squeeze harder.'"

"Well, it all depends how hard you mean. French is a language of very fine distinctions, and before advising you as to the precise idiom most likely to express your requirements . . ."

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden bid for freedom on the part of the night-club singer who was plainly terrified by the inflamed farcics of his captor. But his attempt proved fruitless. The blonde hauled him back onto her lap with a snarl of passion,

at the same time disencumbering herself of her wine-glass by tossing it absent-mindedly over her shoulder, the contents pouring in a foaming torrent down the cleft of an adjacent bust.

The victim, an over-strung Neapolitan brunette, voiced a prolonged wavering scream like an air-raid warning signal, and planted her heel in the teeth of a scholarly old gentleman with a dense forked beard who was declaiming passages from Racine to a seething little red-head romping astride his knees.

This mishap touched-off a violent chain reaction, and a period of considerable turmoil ensued in the course of which some very hard words were exchanged, two windows broken and three people bitten in the leg.

Throughout the engagement the American blonde showed the greatest skill and resolution. Bracing herself against the cushions, she flailed around with her powerfully elegant legs to such purpose that both she and her playmate came off relatively unscathed. When things had settled down, Guy hastened to compliment her on her agility.

"It's this Flikflex girdle I'm wearing," she explained. "They're the latest thing, you know. Perfect freedom of movement in every known position, including the five heretical ones. Just the thing for this kind of party."

"So it seems."

"I was very lucky to get it. I slipped into Gilberte's just as they were closing this evening and snapped it up. It was the last they'd got, and it just happened to be my size. . . . Oh, I say, look who's up there!"

She pointed to the top couchette, on the opposite side of the compartment, which had been lowered into position. It was occupied by a member of the party who had so far escaped Guy's notice : a dark, fragile

young fellow lying flat on his back, fast asleep, his hands crossed on his breast.

"A friend of yours?"

"Why, yes. It's Basil Chancery."

"Who!"

"Basil Chancery. That carnivorous widow in the rue de l'Université must have given him the night off . . . why, honey, whatever is the matter with you? Is something wrong?"

"I rather think," said Guy, plunging into the compartment, "that something is extremely wrong."

He climbed on top of a heap of interlocked bodies and sharply prodded the sleeper who presently sat up, swept the hair out of his eyes and bowed from the buttocks.

"Basil Chancery at your service."

"Guy Random at yours."

"Delighted to meet you, my dear fellow. Pray forgive my bringing all these people into your quarters, but when I got the Shadow's instructions to meet you we were having a little social evening. It seemed a pity to break it up, so I brought them all along. The courier fellow told me I should find you here."

He lay down again and pressed his hands to his forehead. "This entertainment has been going on for seventy-two hours, and I'm feeling rather filleted. I understand you have something for me to deliver to Sir Humphrey."

"I had."

Forgive me if I'm a bit dense, but if I don't get my eight hours' sleep . . ."

"I mean that somebody has impersonated you. When I reached this station, an hour ago, a chap came up and introduced himself as Basil Chancery. He spoke perfect English, knew the recognition sign and made a

coarse reference to a little widow in the rue de l'Université. Naturally, I handed over."

Basil sighed petulantly. "Oh, dear! That means they've cracked our codes again. What busy little bees they are, to be sure. What was the nonsense, by the way?"

"Fortunately it was nothing important. Just a Flikflex girdle for Mrs. Cone's birthday present tomorrow."

At this, Basil sprang down from the couchette with a cry of despair, dragging Guy with him into the corridor.

"But this is terrible, really terrible! The Shadow will be absolutely furious."

"Surely you exaggerate?"

"Exaggerate! You don't know Sir Humphrey. If we'd mislaid a secret document, we'd probably get off with a reprimand. But where his personal affairs are concerned he's a perfect tyrant. We'll both be sacked for this."

"Oh, come!"

"I assure you that I mean what I say, Random. This is quite disastrous. Take the case of Hugo Pocket. When he left the plans of an atomic cannon in a public convenience, Sir Humphrey just said: 'To err is human, to forgive divine, and I rather fancy myself as God.' But when poor Hugo forgot to bring him a box of dates from Tunis . . . whooosh! Out on his neck, and back in the second-hand car trade in a quick-sticks."

Basil raked his hands through his hair, thereby looking more fragile and distraught than ever. "And another thing. If he begins to investigate this business, he'll almost certainly discover that I never got to Istanbul."

"You didn't?"

"How could I, old boy? Every time I started to pack my bag, the little woman carried-on alarming and locked my portable hip-bath in the coal-hole. Besides, I hear the climate is rather trying at this time of year."

He took a deep pull at a silver pocket-flask and folded his arms on his breast. "Random, we shall have to do something about this, and smartish. My train leaves the Gare du Nord in half-an-hour's time. There's not a moment to lose. We shall have to get hold of someone from Gilbert's, persuade them to re-open the shop and sell us another Flikflex."

Guy shook his head. "No good, I'm afraid. They're sold right out. That thumping great American blonde in there has just told me that she got the last one. There's been a tremendous rush on the new model, it seems."

"Then that's that," said Basil starkly. "The Shadow will never forgive a failure like this. We can start looking for another job rightaway."

Guy held up his hand. "Tranquillise yourself, Chancery, and stop panicking. I've got an idea. It's a long shot, but it's worth trying."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well, as I've just told you, that American girl is wearing a Flikflex, and it occurs to me that some more of your lady friends may be wearing them as well. I don't know what Mrs. Cone's measurements are, but there's a fair variety of shapes and sizes in there, and . . ."

Basil swung round and burrowed his way into the compartment where the festivities were now reaching a new peak of enthusiasm. In due course the uproar gradually subsided, and Basil's voice became audible, speaking with the utmost urgency in six different

tongues. A moment later he popped out again into the corridor.

"They all seem to be wearing them, Random."

"Splendid. How many are there?"

"Well, they're all so intertwined that it's a bit difficult to make an accurate census. You're apt to miss some and count others twice over. A dozen or thereabouts, I should say."

"A dozen? With any luck there ought to be one to fit Mrs. Cone."

Basil looked doubtful. "Probably so. But will they hand over, do you think? You know how these Latins are: pretty tight-fisted, and not much sense of team-spirit. We can't afford to buy the things. They cost twenty-five thousand francs apiece."

Guy winced and clucked reprovingly. "Buy them! Don't be childish, Chancery. The thing is perfectly simple. All you need for a job like this is a little guile and perseverance. Your guests are at present in a highly inflammable state and ripe for whimsical mischief. They only need guiding along the right lines."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you, in your capacity as host, must initiate a brisk session of that rousing old parlour-game, Hunt-the-Girdle. I haven't the slightest doubt that in their present condition they will all speedily join in. Once they've got into the spirit of the thing you will have no difficulty in snatching a few samples. You may not get the whole dozen, but you ought to be able to collect half of them at least."

He grasped Basil by the arm and impelled him firmly towards the entrance to the compartment. "If you take my advice, you'll start the ball rolling with the American blonde. She seems a very friendly type of

girl and eager to take her part in group activities of all kinds. Meanwhile I'll nip along and engage a cab for you. If you're going to catch that train at the Gare du Nord there's no time to lose."

Basil hung back. "This is all very fine, Random, but so far as I can see I'm cast in the role of Soft Joe in this operation. Why should I do it all? You're in this, too, remember."

Guy smiled soothingly. "Of course I'm in it, old boy. It's just the old basic principle of The Division of Labour. I do the brainwork and you do the handicraft. Now, in you go! After all, they're your guests, and it's your duty to entertain them."

He pushed Basil smartly inside and snapped the door shut. Very shortly thereafter the pandemonium within exceeded all bounds. Squeals of delight, yelps of anguish, peals of hysterical laughter mingled with resounding slaps, sinister chuckles and the steady twang of wrenched elastic as the compartment dissolved into a whirling kaleidoscope of gossamer fripperies and pearly flesh.

Guy darted out onto the platform and sped towards the station entrance to secure a cab. At the barrier he met the majority of the Sun Spot party making their way from the restaurant to their reserved seats, led by the energetic courier. The latter halted and eyed Guy sternly as he flashed past.

"Hurry along, there, Mr. Random! Don't be late. The train leaves very shortly."

The station was thronged with week-end travellers, and it took Guy nearly ten minutes to get hold of a taxi. At the end of that time there was still no sign of Basil, and he began to fear that something was amiss. He was just on the point of going to investigate when Basil emerged from the station entrance at full gallop

clutching to his bosom a rainbow-hued mass of lastex, satin and flapping suspender tabs.

Guy clapped him on the shoulder and bundled him into the cab. "Well played, indeed, Chancery. I knew you could do it if you only set your mind to the job. There's bound to be one amongst all that lot to fit Mrs. Cone."

"There certainly ought to be," replied Basil, mopping his face and pulling his tie from under his ear. "In the last few minutes I've been privileged to inspect such a variety of feminine architecture as I never believed existed. There's one thing to be said for this secret-agent caper; it is always fatiguing, and often dangerous, but it does broaden one's outlook . . . I say, how very extraordinary!"

Guy leaned in through the cab window. "What's wrong now?"

"Nothing, except that I seem to have harvested two extra specimens. The sum total is no less than fourteen."

"Very odd, indeed. And those two aren't Flikflexes. They're cheap mass-produced things. I wonder where they came from."

Basil shrugged. "Never mind. This type of work is full of little surprises. And now I really must be getting along, or I shall miss my train. Ta ever so for organising everything. It was a bright notion on your part and retrieved a very sticky situation."

Guy waved his hand. "Don't mention it, old boy. A mere nothing. In civilian life I happen to be a professional Negotiator. It's my business to arrange matters."

"I won't forget that," said Basil warmly. "I often need a spot of arranging myself. . . . Farewell, and the best of good luck to you!"

As Guy turned back into the station¹ he saw Basil's guests straggling along the platform towards the exit. The spirit of revelry had now markedly evaporated, especially amongst the ladies who were clearly much agitated. Their hard high-pitched voices ripped the air in staccato bursts of expostulation, and their gem-laden hands described glittering gestures of wrath—gestures which, however, were frequently interrupted to make frenzied grabs at down-sliding stockings.

Guy withdrew discreetly behind a cigarette-kiosk until the coast was clear², then made³ his way back towards the Sun Spot reserved coach. As he entered the corridor he paused abruptly. Standing at the entrance to the devastated compartment was the alert young courier, now but a shadow of his former self. He was in the grip of two exceedingly angry ladies of the over-grown hockey-girl type who were shaking him like a rat. Their Cheltenham accents boomed along the corridor, choked with choler.

“ . . . and when we'd finished our dinner we came back here to find the compartment full of . . . dragged inside . . . thrown to the floor and outrageously assaulted . . . both deprived of our . . . torn off us by brute force . . . ”

Guy promptly stepped into the lavatory and locked the door. So this was the explanation of the two extra trophies. A delicate situation indeed⁴. If those two muscle-bound hoydens got their noses on the scent, they might very well discover that he had been an accessory to their despoilment. In which case Sir Humphrey Clinker would almost certainly have⁵ to write-off yet another of his agents . . .

Presently he peered cautiously from his hide-out and saw his chance. The courier had broken free and was now retreating along the corridor in the opposite

direction, the ladies baying at his heels. Guy did not hesitate. He slipped into the compartment, dragged his bag out from under the seat where it had been jammed during the course of the celebrations, and jumped out onto the platform. There he got hold of a porter to whom he gave a long burst in the vernacular and an enormous tip. Shortly afterwards he was spreading himself at ease in a first-class sleeper. His career as a secret agent was proving unexpectedly strenuous.

5

THE brief Mediterranean dusk enfolded San Felipe del Mar in a dark-blue velvet caress. Emerging from its afternoon coma, the little fishing-port made ready for another long night of business and pleasure. Lights came on in the shops and bars. Strings of fairy-lamps gleamed amongst the trees along the waterfront. In the narrow streets, silent and deserted during the sun-stunned hours of the siesta, the patter of rope-soled sandals mingled with the sound of waking voices. From the tourist hotels came the customary evening symphony of rattling crockery, polyglot chatter and gurgling waste-pipes.

Leslie Spindle, family grocer, Justice of the Peace, and Mayor of Yewbury, was sitting on the sanded terrace outside the Hotel de la Playa, sipping his pre-dinner sherry. He felt irritable and depressed ; partly because he had overdone the sunbathing and

blistered his shoulders, but chiefly because his Mediterranean holiday was proving a dismal flop.

In spite of his fifty years, thinning hair and thickening waist-line, he nourished secret cravings for adventure. Under the tough exterior of the prosperous provincial tradesman there beat the heart of a romantic. He had often longed to visit foreign parts, especially the glamorous countries of the Mediterranean ; and in his restricted leisure-time he had frequently dallied with the glossy brochures of the travel agencies. But pressure of business, combined with a native insular caution, had always held him back.

In the end, oddly enough, it was his wife Beryl who had spurred him on. They would *not* go to Torquay again this year, she had declared. Instead they would go to Spain. Everyone was going abroad these days, and she was sick and tired of having to sit like a stuffed dummy at the Rotary Ladies' tea-parties whilst all her friends yammered about their foreign experiences.

The decision taken, Leslie had allowed his imagination free rein. In the weeks before their departure he had formed a fanciful, if rather vague, picture of his coming holiday : a mixture of brilliant sunshine, blue seas, bull-fights, swarthy types in wide-brimmed hats and dark-eyed beauties kicking up their heels in smoky taverns. In this colourful panorama, the sultry doxies, deliciously pneumatic and possibly accessible, stood boldly in the foreground.

But now, after three days, his programme was falling apart. True, he had found the brilliant sunshine and the blue seas ; but they had simply combined to give him a sore back. As for the other items, he had reckoned without Beryl. She had vetoed the bull-fight as cruel and degrading, the local night-haunts as noisy and vulgar ; whilst the dark-eyed beauties . . .

Leslie winced as he recalled the atrocious scene before luncheon when Beryl had caught him toying with the irresistible buttocks of Consuela, the saucy little piece in the postcard shop. She had gone for him tooth and claw, on the spot, creating such an appalling rumpus that a score of passers-by had crowded in through the doorway to witness his troubling and ignominious eviction. He hung his head and blushed with shame. What a contemptible figure he had cut ! The ludicrous henpecked husband straight out of a low music-hall farce.

His reflections were interrupted by the slow tap-tap of high heels on the pavement. He looked up, and his breath caught in his throat. There she was, the little hussy ! Strolling along as impudent as you please, and grinning all over her face ! There was no doubt about it : she had spotted him and was deliberately leading him on.

His heart turned turtle, and he knocked over his glass as he craned forward to get a better view of those insolently bouncing breasts, those provocatively rolling hips. He pushed back his chair and half rose to his feet. Now was his chance ! She was probably on her way back to the shop. Dare he risk it ? Dare he ?

“ Leslie ! ”

He spun around, flushing guiltily. Beryl was standing in the hotel doorway.

“ Isn’t it time you went up to change ? ”

“ I . . . er . . . don’t think I shall change tonight. The sun has caught my back a bit. If I put on a suit, it’ll only make it worse.”

“ I’d rather you did, Leslie. I’ve just met a very nice couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Glossop, and they’ve invited us to play bridge with them after dinner. You can’t appear in that sun-shirt and slacks.”

He was shaken by a burst of anger. So it was for this that he had come to Spain : to dress himself up in his Sunday-best and spend the night playing bridge with an English couple called Glossop. He might as well be at Torquay !

His anger mounted as he noticed Beryl's sun-reddened nose ; her stiffly crimped hair ; her buxom figure, freed from its customary stockade of bone and elastic, bulging luxuriantly under the gaudy beach-frock. Suddenly he rebelled.

"I'm not going to change, and that's that. If your friends don't like it, they can find somebody else to play bridge with."

"Leslie !"

He sat down and turned his back. "I'm not arguing. My shoulders are damned sore, I tell you ; and I'm not going to make them worse by dressing myself up in a suit."

"Very well, then. If you insist upon going into dinner looking like a tramp, I suppose there's nothing I can do about it. I really don't know what's come over you today. If you ask me, you need a pill."

Left alone, Leslie ordered another glass of sherry, lit a cigarette and gloomily picked up a magazine ; a recent copy of an English society weekly. As he glanced over the photographs, his eye fell upon a familiar figure in grey top-hat and exquisite morning clothes. "Mr. Guy Random assists Miss Katie Crest to pick a winner." He smiled wryly as he examined the photograph. That chap again ! He was a cool customer, if you like.

Beryl was an inveterate student of the glossy weeklies ; and Leslie, leafing through them himself from time to time, had often noticed pictures of the elegant Random poised on a scatstick at point-to-point meetings,

lounging in the sunshine on fashionable beaches, tearing down ski-runs in Switzerland, reclining on his shoulder-blades in plushy night-clubs! And always, it seemed, he was squiring a particularly gorgeous woman—usually, according to the letterpress, somebody else's wife.

There was something about the fellow that tickled Leslie's fancy, arousing a touch of envy and admiration. The stylish nonchalance, the smooth aplomb, the hint of piratical ruthlessness appealed to the suppressed romantic in his temperament. They were qualities which he knew to be singularly lacking in himself, and which he covertly yearned to possess.

Still smarting from his recent tiff with Beryl, he continued to ponder the photograph of Mr. Guy Random adding lustre and distinction to Gold Cup day at Ascot. This chap, he reflected, would not spend his nights at San Felipe playing bridge in the hotel drawing-room. He would be out and around the bars, drinking and dancing and amusing himself with the women. Nor would he have let the grass grow under his feet with Consuela from the postcard shop.

A crisp voice came from the table to his right.

"Camarero ! Un vermouth, por favor, y almejas."

Leslie glanced around, and stared in amazement at the slim figure in slacks, neckerchief and sweater, sprawling in a wooden armchair with his feet propped on the edge of the table. Surely it was . . . he looked again at the magazine lying in his lap. There was no doubt about it. His neighbour was none other than Mr. Guy Random in person ; and staying in the same hotel.

As Leslie shifted in his seat to make a closer inspection, he saw Guy raise his eyes from his newspaper, turn his head and smile benignly. It was Consuela yet

again ; mincing slowly along the pavement towards them on her return trip. As she passed by, giving them her all, Guy spoke in a clear caressing undertone.

“Que bendiga Dios tu madre. Tienes mucho miel en las caderas.”

There was a glitter of black eyes, a gleam of pearly teeth, a still more exaggerated deployment of bust and buttocks. Leslie sat entranced until the delicious spectacle had vanished around the corner. Then he turned to find that Guy was already sprawling at ease again, sipping his vermouth, nibbling his shell-fish, and deeply immersed in his airmail copy of *The Times*. Clearly, so far as he was concerned, the young lady had ceased to exist.

Leslie felt really indignant. It was outrageous, downright scandalous ! To have a lovely little piece like that eating out of your hand and then pass her up without a second thought ! Obviously the chap wasn't interested in anything short of a film-star or a duchess.

At this point Guy looked up, caught Leslie's eye and grinned amiably.

“Good evening, sir.”

Leslie flushed a trifle. “Good evening.” Then he took the plunge. “Er . . . Mr. Random, I believe ? ”

“The same. You seem to have the advantage of me.”

“I recognised you from your photo in this magazine. At Ascot. My name's Spindle. Leslie Spindle.”

“Delighted to meet you, sir. Won't you join me ? ”

Shaken but gratified, Leslie picked up his glass and sat down opposite Guy who offered him a cigarette with a courtly flourish.

“Are you a new arrival, too, Mr. Spindle ? ”

“I've been here three days now.”

"You have? That's splendid. You'll be able to give me all the inside information. Who's who and what's what in San Felipe, and all the short cuts to all the best places."

"I'm afraid I haven't seen much of the town yet."

"Oh dear! You find the heat a little trying, perhaps? Or a touch of the old tum-tum? It's as well to take things easy at first."

"Well, you see, I . . . I have my wife with me."

"Ah."

"And she doesn't seem inclined to mix-in very much. So I've been hanging around the hotel most of the time."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You ought to break out a bit, you know. See the sights, mix with the natives, broaden your outlook and all that sort of thing. What about a stroll around town after dinner this evening? There should be one or two tolerable bars in a place like this."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Random, very kind indeed. But . . . well . . ."

"A previous engagement? Never mind. We must see what we can do some other night."

Leslie was greatly agitated. An investigation of the night-life of San Felipe with Guy Random was a fascinating prospect indeed; an opportunity beyond his fondest hopes. Yet here he was rejecting it for a bridge session with Beryl and the Glossops. His resolution hardened. He was damned if he was going to miss this chance of a first-class night out. He had come to San Felipe to enjoy himself, and it was about time he began.

"I think I could probably get out of it," he muttered. "My wife has fixed up a bridge-four with some other English people. But I'd a damn-sight sooner go round the town with you."

Guy was quite touched by this naive admission. The poor chap was obviously having a pretty thin time of it. All he needed was a little moral support.

"Look here, Mr. Spindle. I don't want to interfere with your arrangements, but I do suggest that there are more profitable ways of spending a Mediterranean night than playing cards in a family foursome. One can always do that at home. •May I advise a sick-headache?"

"A what?"

"A touch of the sun. After dinner you retire to your room, feeling a little seedy. Then you suddenly feel a lot better. •You stroll out by the side door for a breath of air, and here I am wondering what to do with myself. Shall we say eleven o'clock? The night starts late around these parts."

Leslie grinned broadly. "It's a deal, Mr. Random. I'll meet you on the corner there at eleven. Just what I'd have expected from you, if I may say so."

"Indeed? Well, that's my job, you know: making people happy and fitting all their little clouds with silver linings."

Leslie laid a hand on his arm. "Mr. Random, excuse me if I seem impertinent, but might I enquire what you said to that young lady just now?"

"M'm? Oh, you mean that little assortment of domes and cupolas who went around the corner?"

"Yes. Consuela. She works in a stationery shop in the next street."

"I merely observed that she had a great deal of honey in her hips, and invoked the blessings of the Almighty on her mother. Just a conventional civility."

"She seemed to like it. If I'd been in your place, I'd have . . . well . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'd have got cracking. She wouldn't think twice about it, if you ask me."

Guy shook his head. "I'm on holiday, Mr. Spindle ; and the essence of a holiday is complete change. My work brings me into contact with far too many ladies who don't think twice about it—or even once. They think about it all the time."

"Your work, Mr. Random ?"

"Certainly. You seem surprised, even shocked. We all have to eat, you know."

Leslie gave an embarrassed cough. "Well, of course, I only know you by your photographs ; and in those, if you'll excuse me saying so, you don't look like the sort of gentleman who has to work for his living."

"Indeed, I hope not, Mr. Spindle. A gentleman never does."

They finished their drinks and went upstairs together. Their rooms were in the same corridor, and, as Guy stopped at his door, Leslie nudged him roguishly in the ribs.

"Eleven o'clock on the corner, Mr. Random. Don't forget. I reckon I'll have got over my sick-headache by then."

"I sincerely trust so, Mr. Spindle. Because, unless I'm very much mistaken, you're going to have another by tomorrow morning."

After a prolonged hot bath, Guy returned to his room and started to dress. He reached for the leather satchel containing his shaving-gear and swore peculiarly. These inquisitive chamber-maids ! The zipper, which was slightly defective, needed careful handling. And now the tab was jammed half-way round the slide, refusing to budge either way. It took him ten minutes' probing with a nail-file to free the thing.

Another mishap soon followed. When he picked

up his jar of brilliantine, the screw-lid came away in his hand, with the result that the jar turned upside down, smearing his regimental tie with a blob of French Fern.

Guy was infuriated. Like most confirmed bachelors, he was exceedingly finicky in matters of detail. Trivial inconveniences like cross-threaded screws and unsecured lids never failed to raise him to flash-point. If the hotel servants couldn't leave his kit alone he would have to complain to the management.

Before going down to dinner he went to his bag to get his passport which had been requested by the reception-clerk. And this time he suffered something more serious than mere annoyance. When he pushed his key into the small padlock which secured the zipper it refused to turn. Closer examination showed that the lock was, in fact, unfastened. The clasp had been pushed into the slot, but not far enough to operate the spring.

He paused for a moment, frowning. Then he quickly opened the bag and checked its contents : passport, book of traveller's cheques, two tins of English tobacco and some items of a more personal nature. Everything was correct.

He sat down on the bed, lit his pipe and pondered the matter. This was very odd. He might have blamed himself for one, or even two, of these careless slips ; but three, no ! Especially the unfastened lock on his bag. A light-fingered servant, then ? Perhaps. But hotels of this class didn't as a rule suffer from that sort of thing. And, in any case, nothing was missing . . .

Suddenly he sat upright and bit hard on his pipe-stem. It was pretty clear that somebody had been into his room and gone through his belongings ; and that the somebody was not interested in petty theft.

Could it be, therefore, that the intruder was interested in *him*, Guy Random?

Presently he shrugged and stood up. Well, he wasn't going to let the incident spoil his appetite for dinner. It would never do to start getting nervy and imagining things. All the same, it was very queer, very queer indeed.

He took his after-dinner coffee on the terrace. Well fed, well rested, rested from his journey, he sucked gently at his cigar and reflected upon his situation. He found it far from satisfactory. Now that the first flush of excitement was over, he was beginning to realise what he was up against. Here he was, an accredited secret agent, engaged upon an investigation of the utmost international importance—yet he hadn't the slightest notion of what he was looking for. Where did he start? What was his first move? He had only one fact to lay hold of: his predecessor had been knifed in the back and thrown into the sea. And he found himself doubting even that when he surveyed the scene around him.

These middle-aged tourists cosily sipping their drinks; this serene sub-tropical night sprinkled with star-dust and stained by the amber radiance of the rising moon; the oleander blossoms like damp red mouths waiting to be kissed; the distant pulsing of guitars. . . . It just wasn't the background for international espionage and sudden death.

As the minutes passed, he began to feel less and less like a secret agent, and more and more like the victim of an elaborate practical joke. By the time he had finished his coffee, he was so discouraged that his heart would have leapt at the faintest twang of a zither or the briefest glimpse of a hairless Mexican.

His depression speedily vanished, however, when he saw a couple come out of the hotel and sit down at a table at the far end of the terrace. Surely . . . yes, by gad, it was ! The little ravishment of the Folkestone train, and looking more toothsome than ever in a demure white frock of deady simplicity. Her escort was a self-satisfied young fellow wearing a minor university blazer and a proprietorial air. Guy diagnosed the situation immediately : the usual casual hotel hook-up. Ah, well, it would have to be ~~un~~hooked, and without delay.

He got up and strolled aimlessly towards their table. Then, as if taken by surprise, he veered round and advanced upon his quarry with hands outstretched.

“ My dear, how wonderful ! You of all people ! ”

He dropped into a vacant chair and bowed apologetically to the young man who had half risen to his feet.

“ Forgive me, my dear fellow, but I must just crave your indulgence for a few moments. This is the first time we’ve met since our divorce.”

He turned and smiled coyly into the brilliant turquoise eyes.

“ And how are things with you these days ? I do so hope that Cecil is making you happy. He was certainly the best chauffeur I ever had ; and they do say that good mechanics make good husbands. The children, by the way, are very fit ; though it would be idle to deny that they miss you terribly. As a matter of fact, I thought the judge was a bit harsh, refusing you custody. But, still, as it was your third time through the courts, I suppose he couldn’t very well . . . ”

There was the scrape of a chair being pushed back. Guy turned his head and waved his hands soothingly.

“ My dear chap, please don’t disturb yourself. I

should be most upset if . . . oh, come now ! You mustn't run away, really."

The young man backed off, smiling feebly. "Not at all, not at all. Don't mention it. As a matter of fact, I've promised to meet a man at a bar down the street. If you'll excuse me I think I'd better be getting along."

Guy watched him disappear, shrugged deprecatingly and beckoned the waiter.

"And now we can resume our so interesting conversation of yesterday morning. If I remember aright, you were advising me to flush my correspondence down the W.C. The name, by the way, is Random. Guy Random."

"Fanny Traverse. And before we go any further, I should very much like to know their names, age and sex."

"Whose ? "

"Our children's."

"But, of course. They are two-year-old male Siamese twins called Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

"The pets ! I hope they take after me."

"In colouring, yes. In character, I'm happy to say, they share their father's more elevated moral tone."

Guy sipped his drink and eyed her appreciatively "This is a very pleasant surprise, I must say. I can't think how I failed to see you on the train."

"I was lucky. I got a good pick-up on the boat : a diamond merchant who took me first-class to Paris and dined me at the Ritz. There I was fortunate enough to stumble across a Catalan textile designer who developed some fancy designs on me, and brought me down by air to Barcelona this morning. I took evasive action at the air-port, hired a car and motored out here."

"Neat, but expensive."

"Oh, there's always money in textiles."

What a delicious creature she was, to be sure. The discreetly revealing dress emphasised that provoking contradiction of fine bones and full flesh. And there was an equally fascinating contradiction in her behaviour ; for it was with an air of positively schoolgirlish candour that she was admitting to a couple of pick-ups worthy of an expert horizontale.

" You're staying here long ? " he asked.

" I don't really know yet. It depends on the money."

" Yes, yes, of course. I advise you to get into cork."

" I beg your pardon ? "

" Cork processing : the local industry. Not so profitable as diamonds and textiles, perhaps, but a girl must live."

" That was a rude one."

" No offence meant, I'm sure. It's just that I like to encourage budding talent." He lowered his glance eighteen inches. " Though budding, perhaps, is scarcely the word."

" I don't want to hurry you," said Fanny presently, " but they'll still be there tomorrow ; and right now there's a funny little man lurking in the shadows over there, trying to attract your attention."

Guy recovered himself abruptly. " My word, yes. I'd quite forgotten Leslie Spindle. I've promised to seep round the bars with him tonight. I do so hope you'll join us ? "

" That's very civil of you ; but I don't want to disorganise your party."

Guy cupped his hand under her elbow. " Why worry over trifles, Miss Traverse ? What with these, that and the other, you'll disorganise the entire town."

They crossed the road and joined Leslie on the opposite corner. Guy clapped him on the shoulder.

" So you made it all right. Capital show ! Fit as a

'cello and rarin' to go, I hope and trust? Fanny, allow me to introduce Mr. Spindle."

Leslie took the offered hand and bowed jerkily. "Glad to meet you, Mrs. Random. A pleasure indeed."

Fanny shook her head ruefully. "You do me too much honour, Mr. Spindle. Not Mrs. Random. Just plain Fanny Traverse."

Leslie stepped back in confusion. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. But I quite thought that . . ."

Guy hastened to relieve his embarrassment. "Don't give it a second thought, Mr. Spindle. What's in a name? And, talking of names, I think that as we're all hell-bent for a night's debauchery it would be more convenient if we dropped this Mister and Miss business. I suggest we make it Fanny and Guy and . . . ?"

He raised enquiring eyebrows towards Leslie who flushed and shuffled his feet.

"Well, they usually call me . . . Les."

"And very sensible, too. Neat, but not gaudy, and easy on the tongue. And now, forward one and all! The night is before us; a night well suited—to quote a rustic gaffer of my acquaintance—'for boozin' an' dancin' an' oorin' regardless.'"

They went first to a dim little non-tourist tavern at the dark end of the waterfront. A single electric bulb shone feebly through the haze of rank smoke. A few rough wooden chairs and benches lined the walls. The place was packed with sombre, mahogany-coloured customers: fishermen, agricultural labourers, workers from the cork factory outside the town. Their grave conversation was drowned by the raucous din of a radio-loudspeaker fixed above the bar. There was no money here to pay for guitarists and singers.

Guy edged his way discreetly inside. "A little

homely, perhaps; but I've no doubt the wine is serviceable. These chaps can't afford to drink the tourist-trap piddle. They want vague for money."

"It looks a bit scruffy to me," said Leslie. "I doubt the glasses won't be very clean."

"To hell with the trimmings," replied Guy cheerfully. "It's the stuff that matters. It took me years to realise that the only place to get a decent meal in England is the transport-cafés. Now I follow the same principle everywhere."

A few moments later he was deeply absorbed with his neighbours in a highly technical discussion about the cultivation and habits of the cork-oak.

Fanny nodded towards a vacant bench. "Come on, Les. Let's pamper our varicose veins. The maestro, by the looks of things, is settling-in for the next half hour."

Leslie sat down beside her and offered an English cigarette. She shook her head and produced a crumpled packet of Ideales, inhaling the acrid smoke with evident relish.

"I like something I can feel," she explained. "Besides, they're a damn-sight cheaper. This wine is just the job; fair pickles the tonsils. Drink up, Les! This'll blow your sick-headache through the top of your skull."

Leslie was both delighted and slightly shocked. Fanny was precisely the kind of young woman he had seen pictured so often in Beryl's glossy magazine, beautiful, stylish, supremely self-assured. He had often wondered what it would be like to meet one of them: a notion at once fascinating and daunting. To him they had always seemed like creatures from another planet, promising unimaginable delights, but remote, un-touchable, hedged about by a fastidious hauteur.

Now he was actually sitting beside one of them; and

how different it all was from his awed expectations. Miss Fanny Traverse was uncommonly matey ; and she was far more at home in this crude bar than he was. She smoked cheap local cigarettes out of a paper packet, and swigged away at wine which to him was the rawest vinegar. She appeared to converse exclusively in uncouth slang ; and, most flattering and fluttering of all, she persistently addressed him as Les.

Moreover, it was abundantly clear that she was equally human in other respects. The thigh pressed against his own was solid flesh indeed ; as was, too, the resilient curve teasing his upper arm. From time to time the sickly sweet scent she wore was sharpened by a tang of freshly sprung sweat ; and if she had a stitch on under her dress, he, Leslie Spindle, was a Dutchman.

"Wakey, wakey, Les ! You're dreaming. Or are you stinko already ? Surely not ? You plump types customarily mop up the booze like a desert rose."

"I beg your pardon ?"

"I was saying, do you know Guy Random well ?"

"No. We only just met on the terrace outside the hotel before dinner and had a drink together."

"Is he here on holiday ?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Did he say how long he was staying ?"

"No. I didn't ask him."

Fanny lit another cigarette from the stub of the last and stared vaguely at the ceiling.

"What does he do ? For a living, I mean ?"

"Afraid I can't help you, Miss Traverse ; except that . . ."

"Fanny to you. Go on. You were saying ?"

"Well, all I know," replied Leslie, colouring with pleasure, "is a passing remark he made about . . . about women."

"That doesn't surprise me. What did he say?"

"He said something about his work bringing him into contact with far too many of 'em who . . . well . . .",

"Who what?"

"Who . . . who think about it all the time."

"M'm. I see. One of those P.R.O. types, no doubt."

"You mean a Public Relations Officer? Could be."

"No I mean a Private Room Operator."

She swilled the rough wine around in the thick glass and downed it at one gulp, including the dregs.

"And that's all he said?"

"That's all. But I could probably find out a bit more about him if you're that much interested. He's a friendly sort of chap and seems ready to talk."

Fanny shook her head. "Oh, no. I only just wondered. Feminine curiosity, you know."

Guy came across from the bar. "Well? Shall we move on? Having familiarised myself with the local economic set-up, I feel an insane craving for bright lights, soft music and wild, wild women."

"Suits me," cried Leslie. "Bring on the dancing girls!"

Fanny surveyed him gravely for a moment and then patted his cheek. "I can see we've got a proper tearaway on our hands tonight. Unless I'm much mistaken, we're heading split-arse for the county gaol."

Along by the little harbour the tree-shaded roadway was thronged with tourists and, tonight, with townspeople as well, turning out in force for the sardana dancing. On a platform outside one of the bigger bars a band was getting ready to play.

Presently the penetrating reedy notes of the tenora perforated the hot soft air, and the dancers began to form their circles. Linked hand-in-hand in quiet

concentration they traced out the intricate footwork of the dance with subdued gaiety.

"Much more difficult than it looks," said Guy. "To do that properly, you need to be able to count without using your fingers. I'm sticking to the drink."

"I'm going to have a bash at it," declared Fanny. "What with the wine and our Les here, panting hot gusts down my neck-hole, I've fair got my blood up."

She joined the circle, and Guy and Leslie sat down at a table on the pavement to watch.

Guy lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair, gazing out across the harbour to the purple sea. Once more he felt a sense of depression and frustration. Somewhere out there, beyond those twin headlands vaguely looming in the darkness, the body of Henry Salt had been taken from the water. Somewhere under the sensuous glamour of this sub-tropical night there lurked a deadly secret, a secret of world-shaking urgency. The solution of it had been entrusted to him ; and all he was doing about it was traipsing round the bars with an amiable provincial grocer and a gorgeous pick-up.

"Well, I never did !" exclaimed Leslie suddenly. "Who would have thought it ?"

"Thought what ?"

"Why, that old boy over there. Dancing like a good 'un. He can show them youngsters a thing or two."

He pointed to a tall, thin old gentleman on the far side of the sardana-ring who was clearly an expert performer. A lock of silky white hair tumbled across his forehead, and his refined deeply-tanned features were fixed in a whimsical smile. He wore a threadbare grey flannel suit and a pair of grubby tennis shoes. He was embellishing the complicated figures of the dance with fantastic little capers of his own devising, a

virtuoso performance which won encouraging smiles from his neighbours. There was a mildness, a prim courtesy in his bearing that reminded Guy of a frolicsome bishop in civilian dress.

"A pleasant-looking old fellow. You know him?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I know him exactly. I just happened to run into him on the beach the other afternoon. I was taking a walk on my own and he stopped to speak."

"He's English, then?"

"Oh, yes. But it seems he's been out here for years. Lives on his own, as far as I can make out, in a little stone shanty on the headlands. Not much more than a peasant's hovel, really. Simple tastes, I suppose. But an interesting old chap all the same. Gave me quite a lecture about scent."

"Scent? An odd subject."

"Oh, he's made a proper study of it, there's no doubt about that. Launched off about the history of perfumes, and what they used to do with them in the old days, and all the rest of it. He reckons the sense of smell is really the most sensitive of all the five; and if you knew how to set about it, you could . . ."

"My word, I'm dry! There's more in this sardana caper than meets the eye. Allow me to cool my flaming bunions." Fanny drained both glasses of wine and darted back to the dance. "See you 'later."

"Delicious little morsel," mused Guy. "I can't understand her being alone, I must say. In my experience, girls like that are usually included in the personal baggage of theatrical impresarios or out-of-work kings. Hence my rosy glow of self-esteem when you thought she was married to me."

"Sorry about that," mumbled Leslie. "Fair put my foot in it, I'm afraid. But seeing her . . ."

He stopped abruptly, grabbed at his glass, found it empty and waved for a waiter.

Guy gave him a sharp glance. "But seeing her what?"

"Oh . . . er . . . nothing, Mr. Random."

Leslie concentrated on the sardana dancers with an excessive show of interest. Plainly he wished to drop the subject as speedily as possible. But Guy's curiosity was piqued. His companion's embarrassment seemed altogether out of proportion to its cause. He tapped Leslie on the arm.

"Come on, Les. Out with it! No secrets between a pair of roaring boys like us."

Leslie smiled uncertainly and fiddled with his cigar. "Well, I don't want to seem impertinent, but when I saw Miss Traverse . . . er . . . coming out of your room before dinner, I naturally thought . . ."

Guy examined his nails. His voice was elaborately casual. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. More's the pity. I'm in number fifty, you know."

"Yes, I know. Three doors past Beryl and me."

"I can see," murmured Guy, "that you're not convinced. You choose to think the worst—or the best."

Leslie made a determined effort to fight his way out of the uncomfortable situation in which his blundering tongue had landed him.

"No doubt she's on the same corridor, and got the wrong door. You know what it is in a fresh hotel: easy to make a mistake."

Guy nodded and turned away. "It is indeed. Very easy to make a mistake."

The music stopped, and the circles of dancers broke up. There was a surge of customers towards the tables outside the bars. Guy nudged Leslie and pointed along the pavement.

"Look ! There's your little tease with the Capes of Good Hope. And she appears to have got her hooks into your elderly friend with the white hair."

The couple advanced through the crowds and passed close by the table at which Guy and Leslie were sitting. As they drew level, the old gentleman caught Guy's eye, winked saucily and patted Consuela friskily on the haunches.

"Well !" said Leslie. "Would you believe it ? At his age !"

"With a girl like Consuela," said Guy, "it's not age that counts ; it's enthusiasm."

Fanny came up, looking a little moody. "Shall we move on ? I hear there's a night-trap up the street with a proper dance-floor and a band and all. This sardana business is all right as far as it goes, but just holding hands gets a bit tedious. I have a craving to be held elsewhere."

"An agreeable prospect," said Guy, getting up. "I begin to wish that I were those Siamese twins of ours ; thereby holding twice as much in half the time."

El Cortijo turned out to be a very slick establishment, plainly designed to attract and mulct the more prosperous tourists. A long narrow bar led to an open-air courtyard roofed by a dark blue canopy spangled with gilt stars. Three of the enclosing walls were masked by dwarfed cypresses in tubs, and masses of bougainvillea. The seaward wall was pierced by wide archways giving a view over the harbour. There was a circular dance-floor surrounded by tables, and a six-piece band occupied a low dais opposite the entrance. The place was packed with overfed men and underdressed women whose cosmopolitan gabble spattered the walls and rebounded from the canopy in a verbal hailstorm.

"Like Friday night in the Tower of Babel, with pay up!" said Guy. "If only they'd hold the United Nations in a night-box we might get somewhere. There is one policy, at any rate, that is shared by men of all creeds and colours: soak soft flesh in hard liquor and let nature take its course."

They got a table in the second row, and Fanny ordered the drink. The waiter returned with three brimming goblets which proved very expensive.

Guy swallowed a mouthful, gave a long wheezing gasp, and thumbed his eyeballs back into their sockets.

"My God, what's this?"

"Traverse's nerve tonic," said Fanny. "Equal parts of Picon, brandy and Benedictine. After three of these you'll brush your way through a tank-turret and tear the stays off a hospital matron."

"Up them stairs!" cried Leslie coarsely. "This 'ere is just the wallop."

"I've a feeling," murmured Guy, "that we're in for a very rowdy evening."

The band started to play a paso doble. Fanny stood up and held wide her arms.

"Get at me, somebody! The wind is rising."

"I leave it to you, Les," said Guy, settling back in his chair. "I prefer to wait until the edge is blunted."

Leslie looked doubtfully yet yearningly at the ravishing creature standing beside him.

"Well, I'm not much of a dancing man. A bit clumsy on my feet, I'm afraid, and always was."

Fanny hauled him out of his chair and nodded towards the seething dance-floor. "Don't worry about your feet. All you need in there is your hands—and a keen sense of curiosity."

Left alone, Guy relaxed and looked idly around the courtyard. But not for long. A man was standing in

the doorway that led into the bar. He was of middle height, lithely built, tapering down from wide powerful shoulders to small pointed feet. His face was a paper-white mask out of which stared the eyes of a beast of prey. They were black eyes, without any discernible white or iris or pupil : polished black stones, cold, expressionless, unblinking. The low dome of his skull was completely bald.

The cigar fell from Guy's fingers to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it. When he looked up, the man had turned away. He was bowing to a group of new arrivals and directing a couple of waiters who were bringing in more chairs and tables. His wide thin lips were parted over shining white teeth in a professional smile of welcome : the smile of a black mamba waiting for someone to tread on its tail.

Guy took a pull at his drink which now didn't seem a bit too strong. San Felipe del Mar was no longer quite such a cosy corner. A glimpse of the proprietor of El Cortijo had altered the atmosphere. He shifted in his seat and looked out through one of the archways to the dark silent seas. He kept on looking for quite a while, sitting very still. Behind him the dancers stopped and clapped insistently. The band started another paso doble. He heard none of it.

When he turned round, the hairless Catalan was back again by the entrance, talking to a woman in a strapless evening gown. An intervening pillar hindered Guy's view, but he had an impression of black oiled hair, olive skin and sumptuous curves to which, it seemed, the claret-coloured dress had been applied with a spray-gun.

He edged to one side and craned his neck. At the same time the woman stepped forward from the doorway into the full light. It was Mrs. Sheath.

6

SHE came towards him through an avenue of twisted necks, spurting allure like a flame-thrower.

"Why, if it isn't Guy Random ! What a delightful surprise."

"Good evening, Mrs. Sheath. This is indeed an unexpected pleasure." He bowed and drew out a chair. "Won't you join me ? "

"Not unless you promise to stop snubbing me, and call me Myra. You're such a formal person, you always make me feel quite nervous."

"I'm sorry to hear that. No offence meant."

She sat down and gave him a smile to melt a monk in an ice-box. "Don't apologise. As a matter of fact, I find your old-world courtesy rather fascinating. It was the first thing that struck me about you when we met at Monk's Frisking the other day."

"You overwhelm me."

"But I mean it. You were really very sweet when you saw me in that silly little two-piece ; pretending not to notice, like a perfect gentleman, though you were obviously terribly shocked."

"Not at all. The female body has long since ceased to do that. What shocks *me* is the female mind."

"That sounds extremely subtle. I wonder exactly what you mean."

"On the contrary, it's extremely crude. And you know very well what I mean."

Myra sighed and shook her head.

"Tell me, how did you get this way?"

"What way about what?"

"This way about women. Is it low blood-pressure? Or did something peculiar happen in the night-nursery?"

He lit her cigarette with an offensively steady hand.

"Neither. It is the result of twenty years' experience as a professional Negotiator."

"Ah! Like a psychiatrist, you mean? You hear all about your lady clients' repressed desires and so forth? That must be absolutely fascinating."

"It's the unrepressed ones I hear about; and it's absolutely terrifying."

Myra nodded thoughtfully. "We must have a long talk on the subject sometime. Are you staying here long?"

"I haven't made up my mind. Probably quite a while."

"Where are you putting up?"

"La Playa."

"Oh, come! That's scarcely your style, surely?"

"It's quiet and respectable."

"Exactly. Now, I'm at La Conca. A regular home from home."

"That's the super-luxury place across the bay, isn't it?"

"Yes. Why don't you move over? It's very full, of course. But I'm sure Pedro would fix it for you if I asked him."

"Who's Pedro?"

"The bald type over there by the door. He owns La Conca as well as this place. In fact, he owns most of the neighbourhood. He's rather a pet."

"I'm sure he is—if you're good at snake-charming. No thanks, I think I'll stay where I am."

The band stopped, and Fanny and Leslie returned to the table. Guy did the introduction, called for more drink and sat back to watch the fun.

Leslie had the glazed ecstatic look of a dedicated mountaineer who, having conquered the foothills, is suddenly faced with the soul-shaking majesty of the unveiled peaks. The two women, meanwhile, were warily sizing one another up, manoeuvring cautiously for an opening. It was Myra who made the first thrust.

"What a charming little frock you're wearing, Miss Traverse. So clever of you young people to run-up your own things. I can't think how you manage it."

This piece of vile-mindedness startled even the hypnotised Leslie who shifted back his chair apprehensively and reached for his liquor. But Fanny took the insult without a tremor. She smiled sweetly and blew a contemplative smoke-ring.

"Oh, it's not so difficult, really. Just a matter of grasping the basic principles. Such as . . ."

She paused to remove a shred of tobacco from her tongue and let her gaze wander over Myra's claret-coloured sheath.

". . . such as, for example, the difference between simplicity of line and indecent exposure."

"One-all," murmured Guy.

"And just for the record," added Fanny, "this charming little frock I'm wearing happens to be a model. It was *run-up* by Charlus."

She sat back, flushed with triumph. But, with the impetuosity of youth, she had pressed her attack too far, offering her antagonist an exposed flank.

Myra raised her magnificent shoulders in the hint of a shrug.

"Really? Charlus? Quite a good man in his way,

I suppose : but just a teeny bit behind the mode, I always feel. Personally, I prefer Ronsard." She broke off to sip her drink and gather herself for the kill. "However, it all depends on what you want : creations or—imitations."

There was a pause. Guy looked at Fanny with a twinge of sympathy. She was sitting perfectly still, staring at the tip of her cigarette. At last she raised her eyes and spoke haltingly.

"Did . . . did Ronsard make that dress for you ? "

"Certainly. He does all my things. But I'm afraid he isn't taking any more clients at present. You see, he simply refuses to mass-produce as all the others do."

Guy winced. This slaughter of the innocents was too much. He was on the point of intervening when Fanny heaved a deep sigh.

"Ah, well, no doubt I'm old fashioned, but I think I'll stick to Charlus—for clothes. And I'll change to a surgeon when I want a skin-graft."

Myra stiffened and drew in her breath with a bitter hiss. Her long tapering fingers locked around her glass as if to crush it to powder. Her eyes narrowed and her lips turned back from her clenched teeth.

Guy half rose to his feet. This was no longer a laughing matter. Unless he did something sharpish, he would have a first-class pot-house brawl on his hands, complete with slashed faces, gnawed ears and a thumping great bill for splintered furniture.

Then, to his intense relief, the band started to play again : the stealthy, insinuating phrases of a tango. He grabbed Myra's wrist and peered yearningly into her face.

"Come along. This is my favourite tune. Let's see what we can do."

Myra hesitated for a moment, then rose up from her chair in a single serpentine undulation.

"You'll forgive me if I steal your boy-friend for just one dance, Miss Traverse? I promise to send him straight back to you when it's over."

"I'd far rather you sent him straight to hospital," said Fanny. "I haven't the equipment to treat deep chest-wounds."

This riposte was fortunately smothered by a violent fit of choking on Leslie's part, and Guy succeeded in enticing Myra away from the battlefield.

"*Besos en la noche*," she murmured as they stepped onto the dance floor. "Kisses in the night. What a lovely tune."

As soon as he laid hold of her she plastered herself to his frontage, adhering to him squid-style from chest to knee-caps.

"For the tango," she observed in a concupiscent purr, "one must have the temperament."

"Yes, yes. Quite so."

"You know what they say?"

"Not until you tell me."

She pushed everything at him with redoubled generosity. "They say that if you would dance the tango properly you must think all the time of *blood and death*."

"I'll do my best," replied Guy, "in so far as my British phlegm permits."

It was now quite obvious that Mrs. Sheath was determined to foster their friendship by every means at her disposal, and in the normal course of events he would not have been averse from a passing frolic with such a ravishing creature. But his rule never to mix pleasure with business was inflexible. And as a secret agent with a life-and-death mission on his hands, he

had no intention of being diverted from his task by Mrs. Sheath or anyone else. He therefore refrained from further conversation and launched himself into the dance with all the expertise at his command.

But his attempt to blind his partner with science proved abortive. Myra, moving with impassioned precision, followed him effortlessly through each more extravagant and complicated figure. Very soon the other dancers left the floor, and the customers at the surrounding tables turned in their seats to watch the astonishing performance, clapping vigorously and uttering enthusiastic *Olés*.

As the music died its sudden death on the unresolved phrase, Myra clung to him, her head thrown back, offering him her open lips, the colour of freshly spilt blood on black bull-hide. Her voice was a smoking moan.

“Kisses in the night. . . . Ah, Guy . . .”

“Mrs. Sheath! One moment if you please.”

At the sound of the silky foreign accent Guy disentangled himself and turned round. It was the hairless Catalan, the white mask of his face utterly expressionless, his snake-eyes gleaming like black opals.

Myra emerged from her seizure. “Ah, Pedro. You want me?”

“If you please, *señora*. The telephone call you were expecting. It is through now, in my office.”

“Thanks, I’ll come at once.” She laid a hand on Guy’s arm. “By the way, Pedro, this is Mr. Guy Random, a very old friend of mine. He is staying in San Felipe for an indefinite period. I should like you to give him any help he may need.”

He looked at Guy with his cold, dead stare and bowed briefly. “Of course. I am always delighted to do what I can for a friend of the *señora*.”

He turned and glided away between the tables, moving with delicate feline steps on the balls of his feet.

"This telephone call may turn out to be tiresome," said Myra. "So if I don't see you again tonight, I hope we'll be able to meet tomorrow sometime. Why not come across to La Conca and have luncheon with me?"

"That's very kind of you, but . . ."

Her smile was a third-degree burn. "Now, now! No excuses, because I just shan't believe them. If you refuse my invitation I shall be forced to draw my own conclusions. In fact, it's quite obvious already."

Guy avoided her intent stare and answered with careful nonchalance. "What is quite obvious?"

"Why, that you're just the teeniest-weeniest bit afraid of me. No, it's no use your denying it!" She wagged an arch forefinger at him. "I spotted it at once, down at Monk's Frisking. You think I'm a bad, dangerous woman, and you don't trust yourself alone with me."

Guy relaxed, and his momentary suspicion gave place to a touch of pique. "My dear Mrs. Sheath, allow me to inform you that I spend a large part of my working life in the company of bad and dangerous women. If I couldn't trust myself alone with them I should have been out of business many a long year ago."

He folded his arms on his chest and eyed her coldly. "You have, I fear, made the common feminine mistake of failing to distinguish between timidity and natural reserve. It is an error to which beautiful and fascinating women like yourself are particularly prone. They do not realise that there are some men who can greatly admire them without, at the same time, being obsessed by an insane desire to entice them into the red-currant

bushes or hustle them into the boot-cupboard—depending upon the state of the weather.”

Mrs. Sheath was not in the least disconcerted. “Then, in that case there’s nothing to worry about. I shall expect you at one o’clock. And whilst I’m having my siesta you can sit by my bedside and read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to me.”

Guy hesitated, torn between this challenge to his vaunted sex-resistance and the realisation that he ought not to waste valuable time on frivolous social engagements.

“Well?” said Mrs. Sheath. “Still battling with your natural reserve?”

The taunting irony of her smile flicked him on the raw, and his sense of duty yielded to nettled pride. She was deliberately provoking him, and he was damned if he was going to let her or any other woman make a ninny out of Guy Random.

“Who could possibly refuse such a pressing invitation from such a bewitching lady?” he replied smoothly. “I will be with you at one o’clock precisely.”

She patted him fondly on the cheek. “That’s a big brave boy! And now I must run along and take that telephone call. *Hasta luego*.”

Leslie, who was sitting alone, greeted Guy with a confidential wink. “My, my! I bet you’re ready for a drink after all that lot. She’s a proper handful and no mistake.”

“She’s a very naughty and vexatious woman,” said Guy curtly, “who needs putting in her place and keeping there. And I intend to do it. Where’s Fanny?”

“She’s gone through to the bar. Said she wanted some cigarettes. I think she’s a bit huffed about you taking off with Mrs. Sheath like that.”

"Then I'd better go and find her, and try to smooth her ruffled plumage. See you later."

Fanny was perched on a high stool at the far end of the long bar, talking urgently to the white-jacketed attendant who was listening with strained attention.

Guy walked towards her, putting on his most ingratiating grin and rehearsing his excuses. As he came up, there was a momentary lull in the general chatter, and he caught a detached phrase of Fanny's conversation.

"... called Henry Salt ..."

The barman shook his head and smiled apologetically. "No entiendo, señorita. No hablo inglés."

Guy checked, drew his cigar-case from his pocket and bowed his head over cupped hands. Under cover of lighting-up he edged a couple of paces nearer. Fanny's voice was just audible, speaking now in halting Spanish.

"Sabe usted un inglés que . . . que se llama Salt . . . Enrique Salt . . . S-a-l-t . . ."

She stopped abruptly and Guy sensed that she had seen him. He flicked away the dead match and turned about with elaborate symptoms of surprise.

"Ah, there you are! I've been looking for you all over the place."

"Obliged, I'm sure," said Fanny coldly.

"Well, sup up. And then we'll take a turn on the floor."

"No, thank you very much."

"Oh, come! Why not?"

"Because I should hate to interrupt your social activities."

"You mean Mrs. Sheath? I'm sorry about that. But, after all, she is an old acquaintance of mine. I had to do the civil thing and ask her to dance."

Fanny gathered up her odds and ends and got off her

stool. "So you call that dancing? From where I was sitting it was a *prima facie* case of attempted rape."

Guy stepped forward, making soothing gestures and clucking noises. "You're not going, surely? The night has only just started."

She turned to face him, her turquoise eyes flaring. "Certainly I'm going. I'm not a girl who is easily offended; but I am not accustomed to being invited out for the evening and then abandoned for a . . . for a mobile curiosity-shop. Goodnight!"

Leslie was quite upset when Guy returned alone. "Well, that's done it. We've lost the pair of 'em. What do we do now?"

"I suggest we move on," replied Guy. "I feel that, for the moment, I've just about exhausted the possibilities of this place. Or, more accurately, the possibilities have just about exhausted me."

They emerged from El Cortijo into the soft sultry night. It was now one a.m., and San Felipe was really going with a swing. All the bars and cafés along the waterfront were brightly lighted, and the pavement tables were crowded with hard-drinking tourists eagerly divesting themselves of their Northern inhibitions.

Guy surveyed the scene morosely. "Our evening out has turned sour on us, I fear. I feel the clammy hand of anticlimax creeping up my spine."

"We could pick up a couple more cunts," suggested Leslie.

"We could; but I don't advise it. After Miss Traverse and Mrs. Sheath, the Queen of Sheba in a nylon nightie would look like a plate of cold rice-pudding." He sighed and shook his head. "That's the trouble with these glamorous sub-tropical nights. They fill you with a sense of mystery and excitement; and if you don't get it, the whole issue goes as flat as a

degassed soda-syphon. . . . Good God, on a velocipede !
What's that ? ”

They started forward and peered along the roadway as a fusillade of shrill female screams ripped the air. An instant later a galloping figure shot out of the distant shadows and raced madly along by the harbour wall, under the strings of fairy-lights. It was Consuela, hotly pursued by some two dozen males of all shapes, ages and sizes.

There was a general stampede into the street, and Guy sprang onto a vacant chair to get a better view. He caught a glimpse of the pack closing in, headed, to his amazement, by the prim little chartered accountant who had shared his table at dinner. Now, like a hashish-crazed dervish, he flung himself forward and grabbed at his quarry's skirt. There was a hiss of rending cotton, and an agonised yell of terror. Then Consuela, clad only in a muslin blouse and a pair of sandals, swerved across the pavement and in through the open doorway of El Cortijo. Guy and Leslie darted in after her, nimbly sidestepping a couple of waiters who had leapt forward to block the entrance.

Inside the bar the scene was dramatic. The little accountant was hanging limp and dazed in the grip of the two waiters, but nobody was interested in him. All the spectators were clustered around the farther doorway leading into the courtyard, where Consuela was struggling to free herself from Pedro who had her by the wrists.

As Guy and Leslie pushed their way into the front row, she dragged one hand clear and, uttering a very rude word, slashed her pointed finger-nails down her captor's cheek, at the same time hacking him smartly on the shin.

Pedro's face was convulsed in an orgasm of animal

rage. A searing jet of abuse spurted from his peeled-back lips. He jerked Consuela's arm up behind her back and struck her savagely in the face.

At this, without the slightest warning, Leslie took-off like a hunting cheetah. He launched himself head-on at Pedro's chest, knocking him backwards against the wall. Paralysed with astonishment, Guy stood gaping at the maelstrom of whirling limbs. Then he saw it : the sickening glint of a naked knife-blade.

His reaction was wholly automatic : the notorious Random flying tackle that had tidied-up innumerable tavern brawls from Algiers to Singapore. Fully airborne, he smashed into Pedro's knees with his right shoulder, simultancously seizing him about the calves and jerking him violently upwards. Pedro described an acute parabola and crashed flat on his stomach on the tiled floor, his murderous gipsy *navaja* skating away into a corner.

Slowly he picked himself up. For several seconds he said nothing, his black eyes fixed on Guy in their dead unfocused stare. Then his voice sliced the taut silence of the bar : a voice like flaked glass.

" So ! Meestair Random ! "

" So ! Don Pedro ! "

" You . . . you will pay for this, Meestair Random. "

" I always pay, Don Pedro—when the bill is presented. "

With this, Guy took Leslie by the arm. " Come on. Time we were getting out of here. Something seems to tell me that we've overstayed our welcome. "

As they passed through the doorway, a white blur flashed between them and shot along the street. It was Consuela at full throttle. In five seconds dead, she had vanished into the shadows at the far end of the waterfront.

"Well, well," said Leslie. "Quite a to-do. There wasn't much anticlimax about that little lot."

He paused to drag his tie round from under one ear and brush himself down. Then he laid a hand on Guy's arm and peered solemnly into his face.

"I'm not a man to make pretty speeches, Mr. Random ; but you saved my life in there just now. Believe me, I shan't forget it."

"A pleasure, I assure you, Les. Just the thing to smarten-up a dull evening. Don't give it a second thought."

"It was my fault for interfering, I'm afraid. But when he started twisting her arm, and knocking her about like that, I fair saw red."

"So I noticed ; and your sentiments do you credit. All the same, I'd advise you to pick your sparring partners more carefully in future. Unless I'm much mistaken, our friend Pedro is at least three-quarters gipsy ; and they're apt to be a bit handy with the cutlery."

They were interrupted by a discreet cough behind them. It was the tall old gentleman with the white hair, now looking somewhat agitated.

"Good evening. Pray forgive my intruding, but have you by any chance noticed a young lady . . ."

"She went that-a-way," said Guy, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "And judging by her acceleration through the lower gears, I'd say she's well across the Pyrenees by now."

"Oh, dear ! I'm afraid I must have given her a drop too much. . . . Excuse me please . . . and many thanks . . ."

He bowed again, swung around and strode away at top speed in the direction Guy had indicated.

"Well, I don't know what he means by giving her a drop too much," said Leslie. "If you ask me, it was

those chaps who were after her who'd been at the bottle. I never saw anything like it. They were after the poor kid like a pack of maniacs."

"One should never underestimate the effects of climate," said Guy. "These hot Southern nights are apt to do things to well-refrigerated Northerners. In any case, Consuela got no more than she was asking for. Perhaps tonight's experience will teach her not to waggle her bottom at thwarted British husbands, whose hearts of oak—once a little sunshine has dried out the beer and cabbage water—are veriest tinder to a jouncing hip."

"I know what you mean," agreed Leslie. "And now what?"

"Well, personally, I'm about ready for bed. I had a pretty strenuous journey; and I'm having luncheon with Mrs. Sheath tomorrow, so I shall need a good night's rest. I suggest a short walk to clear the smoke and drink out of our systems, and then heads-down."

They strolled along in silence by the harbour wall. From time to time Leslie glanced curiously at his companion who was walking with his hands linked behind his back, his chin sunk on his breast. He was a rum character, and no mistake. On the surface he had turned out to be all that his photographs had indicated: suave, nonchalant, a polished man of the world—and a very devil with the women. But there was something else: a something which didn't quite fit into the picture. At times he seemed quite a serious sort of chap; almost grim. Like a fellow nourishing a secret sorrow or carrying a big load of responsibility on his shoulders. Leslie shook his head and gave it up. Of one thing, however, he was certain: there was a good deal more in Guy Random than met the eye.

At the end of the harbour wall the road veered away

through the last fringe of buildings towards the open country, making an S-bend through a cleft between a row of tall houses and the blank wall of the cork-factory.

As they approached the bottleneck, Guy heard the rumble of a heavy motor vehicle overtaking them. He looked round. It was a big six-wheeler lorry with headlights full on and making a spanking pace. He nudged Leslie into the lee of the houses and stepped in front of him onto the narrow strip of pavement.

A moment later he was overwhelmed by blind panic ; for, glancing back again, he saw that the lorry was coming straight at them, lurching into the S-bend with screaming tyres, and accelerating as it came. He stood petrified, his face twisted back over his shoulder, staring like an idiot at the roaring mass of metal hurtling down on him. Then a yell of warning exploded in his ear, arms locked around his chest, and he was yanked sideways into the shallow recess of a house doorway. At the same moment the lorry thundered past, slewing onto the pavement with its near-side wheels and stripping lumps of plaster off the house wall as it swerved away into the darkness.

In due course Guy released himself from Leslie's embrace and stepped out of the doorway into the road.

"The bloody fool ! Coming into a bend like this at that pace ! He must have seen us : he had his headlights full on. Blind drunk, I expect, or stark crazy."

They turned about and retraced their steps towards the waterfront. When at last Guy spoke, his tone was unusually subdued.

"Well, Les, that levels the score."

"Eh ? What do you mean ?"

"Just that *you* saved *my* life that time. If you hadn't

hauled me into that doorway I should now be a mound of pink mince in the gutter. I thank you. And I shan't forget it."

Leslie fingered his collar in embarrassment. "Nothing to it, nothing at all. It just so happened that I was at the back and saw what we were in for. You'd have done the same thing in my place."

"I wonder," said Guy quietly. "I wonder. I only hope I should."

A few minutes later they reached the hotel.

Before turning-in, Guy slipped on his dressing-gown and unpacked the portable tea apparatus without which he never moved abroad. What with one thing and the next, he felt in need of a soothing nightcap and a meditative pipe of tobacco.

He was interrupted by a cautious knock on his door. He opened up to find Leslie standing on the threshold, still fully clothed and clearly much agitated.

"Come in. What's the trouble? Run out of cigarettes or something?"

Leslie swallowed convulsively. "It's the wife. Beryl."

"What? She's not ill, I trust?"

"No. She's . . . she's turned me out."

"I say!"

"She's found out about that sick-headache caper, and me going round the bars with you and Miss Traversc. She says I stink of drink and women, and she won't have me in the bedroom."

Guy managed to keep a straight face and drew Leslie inside. "This is pretty tough. And all my fault, too, I'm afraid. You've got nowhere—to sleep, I take it?"

"No. We've only got the one room. I suppose I could ask the night-porter if there's anywhere I could go, but . . ."

"Quite," said Guy, pressing him into the armchair. "I see your point. A somewhat embarrassing situation. The solution is obvious. You must share my bed. It'll be a bit of a tight fit, I fear ; but as we both stink of drink and women, we shan't inconvenience one another."

"It's very decent of you to suggest it, but really I don't like to intrude."

Guy held up his hand. "Don't worry about that. We dissipated town-rakes must stick together. As a professional Negotiator, I am fully conversant with over-jealous wives ; and as a confirmed bachelor, I'm fully conversant with overcrowded beds. We'll kip down together, and to hell with domestic tyranny !"

Leslie sank back in his chair with a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette and gratefully accepted a cup of dark brown tea.

"This is the real desert brew," said Guy. "Just the thing to steady the nerves after a night of cold steel, hot women and short-sighted lorry drivers."

"That chap wasn't short-sighted," said Leslie quietly. "He saw us all right. And you know it."

Guy slowly put down his cup. "Say again ?"

"He meant to get us. Or, rather, he meant to get you."

Guy carefully relit his pipe. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

There was a pause. Then Leslie leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. There was a shrewd glint in his amiable little eyes.

"I'm going to speak my mind, Mr. Random, and I hope you won't think I'm talking out of turn. I'm a bit of a rough diamond ; and I've not been around much. But I reckon I can see as far through a brick wall as most people."

"Well ?"

"I've been putting two and two together this evening, and it's pretty clear to me that . . . that there's something on."

"Meaning what?"

"I don't know. But the picture isn't right. A chap like you doesn't normally come to a quiet, little place like this; and he doesn't travel second-class with a mob of tourists; and he doesn't stay in a modest family hotel. Not from choice, at any rate. If he does, he's got some reason for it."

"It's a point of view."

"What's more, Mr. Random, in my own small way I'm a pretty fair judge of character. I have to be in my line of business; otherwise I shouldn't have got where I have."

"I take your word for it."

"Well, I've been watching you tonight, and you've been like a cat on hot bricks, as the saying goes. When a chap's on holiday he's relaxed, carefree, happy-go-lucky. But you aren't. Oh, I know we've been round the town, drinking and dancing and touching up the women . . ."

"Really, Les!"

". . . but all the time you've been properly keyed-up, with your eyes in the back of your head."

"You have a vivid imagination, I suspect."

Leslie lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the last. "There are some things, anyhow, that I'm not imagining, Mr. Random. When I told you that I'd seen Miss Traverse coming out of this room of yours, you were fair shaken—and a gentleman like you, if I may say so, isn't usually upset when he hears that a little bit of nonsense has been in his room."

"Well? Go on."

"And it may interest you to know that Miss Traverse

asked me a lot of questions about you tonight. Oh, she covered it up very well, but I could see that I'm not the only one who thinks there's something queer about the set-up."

Leslie dropped his voice. "And I'm not imagining that lorry either. As I said just now, that chap deliberately tried to run us down—and you know it as well as I do."

Guy sat up on the bed and tapped his pipe in the palm of his hand. "I'm going to ask you a question, Les. Supposing there is something on, what do you think it is?"

"I don't know. I've no idea, But . . ."

"Yes?"

"I wouldn't mind betting it's something pretty dangerous."

Guy poked studiously in the bowl of his pipe with a matchstick. "In that case, don't you think you'd better forget about it?"

"No, I don't."

"You seem very decided. May I ask why?"

"Because," said Leslie, flushing acutely, "I've taken a proper fancy to you, Mr. Random, and . . . and I'd like to help you."

Guy pondered the tea-leaves in the bottom of his cup. "Thank you, Les. That's very civil of you. And you're a shrewder chap than I thought. As a matter of fact, there is something on."

"Dangerous, like I guessed?" enquired Leslie eagerly.

"Yes. Very. And don't ask me what it is, because I don't know. You're quite right about that lorry, of course. That's twice in forty-eight hours that somebody has tried to finish me off. The first time it was a poisoned banana at Boulogne."

"Wheecw ! Just like one of them secret-service types in the thrillers."

"Precisely. And that's what I am : a secret agent. An occupation which, I may say, is proving altogether too thrilling for my taste."

Guy spread himself at ease on the bed and puffed out a cloud of ash and sparks. "I propose to take you entirely into my confidence. A short time ago, the body of a young Englishman, called Henry Salt, was picked up by a fishing-boat in the bay out there, with a terrible knife-wound in the back. Salt was working for the same organisation to which I have the honour to belong. Just before his death he passed a message to headquarters hinting that he was onto something of the utmost international importance. I have been sent here to find out what that something is. I have no clues, no starting point of any sort or kind. I am working completely in the dark. Two things, however, are painfully clear. First, Salt was onto something so hot that certain people found it necessary to murder him. Second, the same people have a pretty shrewd idea that I'm on the same game—and that it is equally necessary to murder me. That's all I know."

Leslie shifted in his chair and wiped his forehead. "My word ! I never guessed it was anything like this, Mr. Random."

"Well, you know now. And I haven't minced my words because I don't want you to be under any illusions. A few moments ago you said you would like to help me. I should be glad to know if that offer still stands."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I can't say at the moment. But I have a feeling that for this job I'm going to need what the military men call a strategic reserve. As I see it, there are two

phases in the operation. First, to find out what the secret is. Second, to get away with it. With a bit of luck, I may succeed in the former. But in view of what happened to Henry Salt, I'm not too optimistic about succeeding in the latter."

"You mean if they finish you off, I'm to carry on?"

"That's the general idea. And believe me, I shan't blame you in the least if you decide to change your mind. In fact, I've really no right to ask you."

Leslie sprang to his feet, his eyes shining. "Me change my mind? Not likely! It's just the sort of carry-on I've wanted to have a bash at all my life. For the past thirty years, Mr. Random, I've been standing behind a counter selling groceries to a lot of nattering women. I've made a hell of a lot of money at it—and I've hated every minute of it. God! how I've longed to get away from it all and taste a bit of real adventure. And now's my chance—if you think I'm fitted for the work."

"I've no doubt about that," replied Guy quietly. "The chap who finds time to think of other people's welfare in the face of a ten-ton lorry is fitted for almost anything. Even dancing the tango with Mrs. Sheath."

"Then I'm in?"

"Yes, you're in. For precisely what remains to be seen. But I've a notion that whatever it is, it will more than compensate for thirty years' persecution by the housewives of Yewbury."

A good deal later Leslie put aside his cup and shook his head.

"No, I just can't believe that Miss Traverse is one of *them*. Why, she's a regular little pet; friendly and playful as a kitten."

"Quite so. And tiger-kittens are playful little pets—until they turn on you and rip you to tatters."

"Then you really think . . ."

"I think nothing. I'm simply looking at the facts. You must admit that they add up to something pretty significant. Consider the sequence of events. Fanny Traverse deliberately gets into conversation with me on the London-Folkestone train. Shortly afterwards I narrowly escape sudden death at the hands of a poisoned banana. Then she turns up here at San Felipe, the one place in all Europe where I happen to be bound for. Moreover, she is booked-in at the same hotel. Next, she slips into my bedroom, whilst I'm having a bath, and goes through my kit with a fine-tooth comb ; after which she tries to check-up on me by cross-questioning you."

Leslie gestured impatiently. "I know, I know. It all sounds pretty suspicious when you reel it off like that. But it could just as easily be coincidence and feminine curiosity. You can't be sure it was her who went through your kit. She probably got into your room by mistake."

"You think so? Well, I don't. I had a word with the night-porter after we got in this evening, and for the price of fifty pesetas I obtained the number of Miss Traverse's room. It isn't even on this floor, never mind this corridor. It's two floors below. If it was a mistake, it was a pretty big one."

"Well, I never."

"And as for coincidences : would you say it was just chance that she was asking the barman at El Cortijo if he knew of an Englishman called Henry Salt ?"

"Good God !"

"Exactly. I only overheard a few words, but that's what she was after."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked Leslie at last.

Guy got off the bed and knocked out his pipe. "I'm going to take a little exercise. I intend to return Miss Traverse's social call, and see what I can find in *her* klt."

"What? Now?"

"Certainly. Random for prompt service every time."

"But how are you going to get in? She's almost sure to have locked her door; especially if she really is a . . ."

"Don't worry about the door," replied Guy, reaching for his slacks and sweater. "I'm going in by the window. There's one thing you'll soon notice about the Random technique, Les. I not only get the results, but I always do things in style."

The hotel was in the form of a hollow square, the bedrooms looking down into a central gravelled patio with a fountain and some flowering shrubs in the middle. Guy's room was on the top floor. He went onto the balcony and pointed downwards and to the left.

"That's my objective: the window with the white bathing-costume hanging outside it. I do so hope the little tease is a sound sleeper."

"But you can't get down there," protested Leslie. "You'll break your perishing neck."

"Come, come! There are some things which are better left unsaid—even between prospective bedmates. If you use your eyes, you'll see that there's a wonderfully convenient drainpipe along the wall there."

Yes, but . . ."

"I do wish you wouldn't carry on so," replied Guy, spitting on the palms of his hands. "You'll finish up by making me quite nervous. If it's any comfort to you, one of my hobbies is rock-climbing. I may say it's

very little comfort to me. See you presently—I hope.”

With this, he stepped up onto the iron railing and stood there, fifty feet above the ground, balancing himself with the finger-tips of his left hand touching the wall. Then he took a deep breath, flexed his knees and sprang kangaroo-fashion across ten feet of empty space onto the next balcony to the left.

Here he again climbed onto the railing, this time facing inwards towards the wall. By stretching his right arm to the fullest extent, he could just get a firm hold on the drainpipe. He closed his eyes, set his teeth, and canted himself outwards, at the same time heaving his body onto the pipe with a powerful winching action of the right arm. There was a nasty moment as he missed the target with one foot, a mishap which left him hanging for an instant by his finger-grips alone; but presently he was shinning comfortably downwards to the level of Fanny Traverse's balcony two floors below. There it was a simple matter to haul himself aboard by the railing.

The windows were wide open, with only the muslin curtains screening the room. Guy waited until his breathing was normal, then took a pencil-type flash-lamp from his pocket and stepped inside. He stood motionless in the shadows, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Presently the outline of the figure on the bed took shape. Fanny was lying on her back with all the covers thrown aside. One knee was slightly flexed, one hand was tucked under her head. She was breathing deeply and evenly.

Guy switched on his torch and began his inspection. The slender beam of light disclosed a single empty suitcase on the luggage stool; the usual washing-gear

littering the handbasin ; the merest essentials of toilet equipment on the combined dressing-table and chest-of-drawers.

He moved to the wardrobe cupboard. It contained very little : the admirable suit, the Charlus model and two other frocks, a featherweight mackintosh, two pairs of shoes. There was nothing in any of the pockets.

He set about the chest-of-drawers with extreme caution. It was a short job. Only two were in use, and they held nothing more than stockings, a spare night-dress, a handful of negligibles and a few odd sundries. Fanny Traverse, it seemed had nothing to learn in the art of travelling light.

He stepped up to the bed. A charming sight indeed. Under his torch-beam the ivory chiffon and lace was neither here nor there . . .

In due course he pulled himself together and got on with his work. He directed the light upwards, carefully avoiding the sleeper's face. His eyes widened and he drew in a sharp breath. Under the edge of the pillow there was a dull gleam of metal. He leaned closer, probed with his finger and recoiled. Miss Traverse's bedtime toy was a .38 automatic.

When his pulse had settled down, he turned to his last resort : the night-table. One object only was on display : a big and damnably expensive handbag. He opened it eagerly. Here, if anywhere, he would find the grift. But again he was disappointed. Her passport described her noncommittally as a private secretary : that might mean anything. A rough mental calculation on her traveller's cheque-book indicated that she had no more than the statutory allowance ; certainly no secret funds, unless she had cash hidden away somewhere. The other items were commonplace : powder compact, cigarette-case, lipstick, gold-backed comb.

He straightened up with a suppressed grunt of annoyance. He had drawn a complete blank. Short of drastic action such as ripping up the floor-boards and disembowelling the mattress, there was nothing more he could do.

Then he stiffened. His fingers, still searching the inside of the bag, had found a small interior pocket. And there was something in it . . . something suspiciously like a folded slip of paper. He was just withdrawing his hand when Fanny snorted in her sleep, twitched violently and rolled her head on the pillow. He killed the torch and froze solid. A moment later the silence of the room was shattered by a tremendous hiccough. Craverse's nerve tonic was taking its revenge.

Guy was out on the balcony in three soundless strides ; and five seconds after he was wrapped around his drainpipe, going up the wall of the hotel like an interplanetary rocket.

Leslie welcomed him with a quavering sigh of relief. " Thank God you're safe back, lad ! My word, you're a cool customer and no error. I watched you both ways. I don't know how the hell you didn't kill yourself."

Guy collapsed panting into the armchair and waved feebly towards the tea outfit. Leslie poured a cup and brought it over, lacing it solicitously with a dash of brandy from Guy's silver hip flask.

" Well, did you find anything ? "

" I'm not sure. I was interrupted and had to make a bolt for it . . . just a minute, where the hell did I put the thing . . . ? "

He rummaged in his trousers-pocket and came up with an oblong slip of pasteboard.

" I got this . . . I say, how very surprising ! "

It was a tastefully designed business-card, inscribed

with elegant copper-plate script, *Parfums Baudelaire*. And, in the lower corner, in smaller lettering : Miss Fanny Traverse.

"Not much in return for a climb like that," said Leslie. "What's it mean, anyway?"

"It means, apparently, that Miss Traverse is, or was, employed by one of the most exclusive houses in the stinks racket."

"The what?"

"The scent business. Have you never heard of Baudelaire's *Madrigal Triste* and *Femmes Damnées*? I forget exactly how much they cost an ounce, but it's something quite immoral. I always stick my fees up twenty per cent, when I sniff either of those on my lady clients."

"And didn't you find anything else? You were in there long enough, I must say."

Guy, who was frowning thoughtfully at the slip of pasteboard, looked up irritably as Leslie nudged him in the ribs.

"M'm? What?"

"I said," repeated Leslie with a disgusting wink, "didn't you find anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. A .38 automatic, to be precise. Think that one over, you dirty old man."

But Leslie's interest in fire-arms was plainly minimal. He leaned still closer, breathing feverishly down Guy's neck.

"Come on, tell us! What was it? Nighty or pyjamas?"

Guy reached impatiently for his tobacco tin. "Pyjamas? Really, Leslie! One thing, surely, is abundantly obvious to the meanest intelligence: Fanny Traverse is not a girl who wastes her time—or anybody else's."

At eleven-thirty the next morning Guy was patrolling the waterfront, looking impatiently at his watch and scanning the groups of tourists on the pavements. Presently there was a scurry of footsteps behind him, and Leslie darted forward from a cluster of oleander bushes. He was sweating freely.

"Sorry I'm late, but I had a hell of a job getting away."

"Come and have a drink," said Guy. "You look dangerously dehydrated."

He led the way across the road towards the tables under the striped awning outside El Cortijo. Leslie hesitated and hung back.

"Is it wise to try this place, do you think? They may not be too pleased to see us after last night's rough and tumble."

"There's something in what you say ; but it's the plushiest boozer in town, and I intend to go on using it."

"If you ask me, you're just looking for trouble."

"Possibly so ; but I have my professional reputation to consider. If it got about that Guy Random had been seen in anything *but* the plushiest boozer in town, my prestige would plunge like a panel-star's neckline—and my fees with it."

"Well, I only hope," said Leslie, as they sat down at a vacant table, "that we don't get slung out on our fannies. There's a couple of chaps by the doorway giving us some pretty dirty looks."

Guy glanced over his shoulder. "You're right. And they're coming over. Well, let's give them something worth dirty-looking at."

With this, he slid his hand inside his silk shirt and turned to smile amiably at the two waiters who were now standing beside the table. Under their discreet, correct bearing there was the veiled menace of the expert chucker-out winding-up for action.

"If you please, señor . . ."

"Well?"

"I am sorry, señor, we cannot serve you and your friend. We must ask you to leave. At once."

"Say that again."

The two musclemen closed in, one at each flank. The obsequious smiles had vanished.

"For the last time, señor . . ."

There was a faint metallic clink as Guy withdrew his hand from his shirt-front and placed something gently on the table between his pipe and tobacco-pouch. It was an atrocious horn-handled stabbing knife with a double-edged nine-inch blade tapering to a needle point.

"My God!" gasped Leslie. "What's that?"

"What do you think it is? A fish-cake? Actually it comes in very handy for paring the corns; not to mention a sovereign remedy for the indigestion."

He yawned, flicked the blade with his finger, and spoke softly without looking up. "Waiter, two dry sherries, please. *And bloody quick about it!*"

"Yes-señor-at-once-señor."

There was a patter of retreating footsteps, and Leslie grinned delightedly. "That soon changed their tune. We shan't have any more nonsense out of them, I reckon."

Guy slid the knife back into the sheath below his left

armpit. "There's nothing like showing that you're familiar with the local customs. You get so much better service."

"It's a nasty looking tool, and no mistake. Do you always carry it?"

"Very rarely. Only when dining in private with widows under fifty, and riding in taxis with virgins over thirty."

When the drinks came, Guy tipped the waiter handsomely, shrugging away Leslie's indignant protests. "It's no use being small minded about these things. I don't blame the chaps at all; they were only acting under orders. I shall reserve my spleen for our friend Pedro, who ought to do his own dirty work."

He lay back and filled his pipe. "And now, perhaps, we can have a few minute's quiet conversation. I was quite upset, by the way, when you didn't arrive on time. I began to fear that you'd changed your mind and decided to resign."

Leslie flushed indignantly. "I couldn't help being late. It was Beryl. She never let me out of her sight all morning; and when she did go off, to get her hair done, she left me hooked-up with the Glossops. I had the devil's own job to get rid of them. In the end I nipped into a chemist's shop and persuaded the chap to let me out by the back door."

"Neat work. I can see that you're properly getting into the swing of things. Before long you'll be vanishing down manholes and cantering round the sewers. However, if you're going to be a secret agent, you'll need reasonable freedom of action. I advise you to take a firm line with the spouse. I may be old-fashioned, but I strongly maintain that married life is only tolerable when the husband is the master in his own nest—and his wife the mistress in someone else's."

Leslie sighed bitterly. "It's all very well for you to talk ; but being firm with Beryl is easier said than done. She's been the boss from the start. You see, it was her capital that set me up in business."

Guy shook his head. "A major blunder, alas. One should never accept money from a woman, Les. Pearl studs and diamond cuff-links, if you like ; or even that gem of purest ray serene which, once bestowed, can never be retrieved. But never money. A fifty-pound scarf-pin makes you a lover : a five-pound cheque turns you into an investment."

"Too true," agreed Leslie. "And you don't half have to show a dividend neither. But don't worry. I'll manage Beryl somehow. Have you decided on your plans yet ?"

Guy nodded. "Yes. I've been thinking things over very carefully since last night, and I've come to two conclusions ; that Fanny Traverse is after the same thing that we're after, and that, so far, she's as much in the dark as we are. Therefore it's a race between her and us."

"And a pretty tough one, too, from the looks of things."

"Agreed. It would be idle to deny that she holds some strong cards. For one thing, she obviously knows now exactly who I am and what my game is. For another thing, she enjoys the backing of a highly efficient and completely ruthless organisation which sticks at nothing—including murder. However, we on our side have one great advantage : the element of surprise."

"What do you mean ?"

"I mean that whereas, on the one hand, she knows who I am, she does not, on the other hand, know that I know who she is. I make myself quite clear ?"

"Well . . ."

"And, equally important, she doesn't know that you're working with me."

"Ah !"

"I have decided, therefore, on a twofold policy : positive and negative. Mine will be the positive role. I shall start my own line of investigation and follow it up with all speed. Yours will be the negative role, but just as vital, if not more so."

"What do you want me to do ?"

"Shadow Fanny Traverse and watch every move she makes. It's a counter-espionage job, Les, and it's tremendously important. You'll have two big responsibilities. First, to protect my rear, so to speak, whilst I get on with my own investigations. Second, to make quite certain that she doesn't steal a march on us and beat us to the objective."

"It looks as if I've got plenty on my plate."

"You have. But I'm confident you can manage it . . . the spouse permitting. Any questions ?"

"Yes. How am I to deal with Miss Traverse. It's going to be a bit tricky. She's such a friendly little thing. Only this morning . . ."

"Yes ? What ?"

"Well, she got into the lift when I was going down to breakfast with Beryl. And as soon as she saw me she yelled out, 'Hail to thee, blithe spirit ! How's the perishing kidneys ?' and pinched me on the bottom."

"Don't let that sort of thing worry you. Indeed I advise you to encourage it within reason. It will help you to keep an eye on her. With one proviso, however : don't be tempted to confuse business with pleasure. It's a common failing amongst secret agents, as I happen to know to my cost. I suggest that, in so far as you are

able, you avert your thoughts from the gossamer slumberwear, and rivet your fancies on the heater."

Guy stood up. "That's that, then. Keep a close watch on everything the girl does, and report to me on the hotel terrace before dinner. I must get along now for my luncheon date with Mrs. Sheath."

Leslie gave me an old-fashioned look. "Is *she* part of your investigations?"

"Not exactly. I regard her more as a preliminary toughening-up course."

"*Leslie!*"

There was a sudden hush as the company outside the café broke off their conversation and turned in their seats to stare.

"My God!" muttered Leslie. "It's Beryl."

Guy looked round to see a bulky middle-aged blonde advancing towards them between the tables. She was a formidable sight indeed. Her brassy hair was moulded into rigid convolutions. Her hard, sharp features were fixed in a bitter scowl. A boldly patterned and overly tight sun-frock emphasised her undisciplined curves which swung and juddered in all directions as she strode forward on spike-heeled sandals. She was wearing a great deal of costly jewellery, and carrying an outsize snake-skin handbag.

Guy's first reaction was a keen pang of sympathy for Leslie. No wonder he was so eager for a frisk with the doxies. This acidulated face, this superabundant flesh suggested all too clearly that Beryl's sexual instincts had long been diverted from the connubial couch to liqueur chocolates and cream puff-pastry.

As his colleague appeared to have been turned to stone, Guy rose to his feet, smiling winsomely.

"Good morning, Mrs. Spindle. Allow me to

introduce myself. Guy Random at your service. Won't you join us ? ”

Beryl ignored him completely. Placing her hands on her hips, she scrutinised her husband with mingled fury and revulsion.

“ What do you think you're doing here ? ”

“ Why, I . . . I'm just having a drink, that's all.”

“ I can see that for myself. I thought I told you to entertain the Glossops.”

“ Well, I . . . ”

“ All right ; you needn't try to think up any fancy stories. I know what happened. Really, your behaviour is abominable ! Speaking off like some sly little school-boy and leaving our friends to kick their heels . . . ”

“ They're not my friends,” declared Leslie peevishly. “ It wasn't my idea to tag around with them.”

Beryl transfixed him with a pair of steel-blue eyecicles. “ No doubt you'd rather tag around with that saucy little picce from the stationery shop ; or that impudent hussy who tried to pick you up in the lift this morning. A man of your age ! It's downright shameless. And you a magistrate, too ! If you're not very careful, you'll finish up in gaol yourself one of these fine days.”

At this point Guy decided to intervene, partly to succour his companion, and partly to relieve his own embarrassment. He coughed discreetly, and inclined himself between the conflicting parties.

“ Pray forgive the interruption, Mrs. Spindle, but I think I can perhaps explain this unfortunate misunderstanding. The fault—if fault there be—is entirely mine. It was I who suggested that Les—Mr. Spindle, that is—should join me here for an aperitif before luncheon.”

Beryl turned and looked him slowly up and down.

Her scrutiny was a subtle combination of a spit in the eye, a fist in the solar plexus and a knee in the private parts.

"So it was you who suggested it, was it?"

"Er . . . yes."

"Then I'll thank you to keep your suggestions to yourself in future."

"Really, Mrs. Spindle, I must confess that I find your attitude a little difficult to understand. Surely there's nothing wrong in a couple of chaps having a quiet glass of sherry together?"

The table rocked and the glasses tottered as Beryl took two sharp paces forward.

"Just you listen to me, Mr. Guy Random. I don't know who you are, or what you are; but this I do know: I don't like your manner and I don't like your habits, and the sooner you take yourself off the better I'll be pleased."

"Oh, come . . ."

"Don't *oh* come me, young man! I know what happened last night. Make no mistake about that. Mr. Glossop saw my husband sneak out of the hotel and go off pub-crawling with you and that Traverse girl—a brazen little piece if ever there was one. *And* I know that Leslie didn't get in until two o'clock this morning. *And* I know that he got back reeking of drink and scent as if he'd spent the night in a . . . in a you-know-what. *And* he probably did, it wouldn't surprise me . . ."

Beryl advanced another pace, and Guy, rebounding from her exuberant bust, sat down abruptly in his chair.

"So you can put that in your pipe, and smoke it, Mr. Guy Random! If you want a pal to go drinking and tarding with, you can find somebody else. My husband

and I have always kept respectable company, and I'm going to see that we stay that way."

With this, she seized Leslie's arm and jerked him smartly to his feet. "You're coming with *me*. Now ! And you'll make a proper apology to the Glossops. They're waiting for us down the street."

As Beryl turned away, prodding Leslie in front of her with her handbag, Guy spotted a sedate couple advancing to meet them. He instantly recognised the prim little man in the panama hat as last night's passion-sodden maniac who had chased Consuela along the waterfront and deprived her of her small-clothes.

He promptly got up and set off in pursuit of the quartet who were now some fifty yards ahead. As he overtook them, he slowed his stride and turned with a genial smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Glossop ! Snatched any good skirts lately ? "

LA CONCA, a big new hotel de grand luxe, was perched on the tip of the Northern headland of the bay, its frontal terrace looking straight over the edge of the tawny cliffs to the ink-blue Mediterranean two hundred feet below. On the other three sides it was surrounded by beautifully designed gardens stocked with the usual sub-tropical amenities : stone-pines, cypresses, tamarisks, magenta and scarlet bougainvillea, succulent yellow and flame-coloured cannas.

Alighting from his ancient taxi, Guy approached the main door with a keen sense of satisfaction. This sort of thing was rather more to his taste than the homely ambience of La Playa. Respectability and modest comfort, he reflected, were all very well in their way ; but this demi-mondaine elegance, this shameless

luxury were better attuned to the Random style and technique.

As he stepped into the cool, shaded foyer with its ankle-deep carpets, he congratulated himself on having donned his sober grey flannel suiting. La Conca was plainly not the place for denim slacks and fishermen's jerseys. At the same time he could not help regretting that Sir Humphrey had condemned him to flaunt this gaudy stripe of "a mediocre infantry regiment." He would have preferred, for an occasion such as this, a more sombrely distinguished cravat : his dark blue, say, with its discreet peppering of white bishop's mitres.

He announced himself, a telephone call was put aloft and he was requested to wait. Mrs. Sheath's profound apologies ; she was unavoidably delayed but would be with him very shortly.

He established himself in an armchair in view of the lifts and settled down with a newspaper. Ten minutes later he was still waiting and beginning to feel a fraction piqued. Myra was over-stepping her privileges. The customary female nonsense of a five-minute delay was fair enough ; but anything beyond that was apt to irritate the Random amour-propre, as sundry dilatory ladies, who had unwisely tried it on, had discovered to their cost—of paying for their own luncheons.

He had just decided on the regulation snub of ordering himself a drink, when one of the lift-doors opened and Pedro stepped out. He was looking sprucely sinister in a suit of tussore tropicals. From behind the newspaper, Guy watched him move across the foyer to a door marked "Private" in four languages ; and he observed with relish that the cat-like walk was this morning hindered by a pronounced limp. Clearly, last night's flying-tackle was making itself felt.

Half-way across the foyer, Pedro halted to smile and bow effusively over an aged lady whom two servants were trundling in from the gardens in a wheeled chair. The white teeth flashed ; the delicate hands fluttered in smooth conventional gestures ; the usual solicitous enquiries as to health and comfort flowed' from the thin, cruel lips. Altogether it was a most impressive demonstration of an enterprising hotelier smarming-up a valued client.

But Guy was much more impressed by something else. Pedro was so positioned by the wheeled chair that, every time he bowed over its mummified and jewel-studded occupant, the hairless crown of his head was presented for Guy's inspection. And there, slap in the middle of the lard-white dome, was a perfect cupid's bow of sullen purple lipstick.

As Pedro finally vanished through the doorway of his private office, Guy put aside his newspaper and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. Myra Sheath had obviously solved the vexatious problem of the fifty-pound travel allowance.

" Ah, Guy ! How nice of you to come. And what a ducky you look in your little grey suit."

She was standing beside his chair, a ravishing spectacle in a casual masterpiece of straw-coloured shantung. As he rose to his feet, she patted his cheek, enveloping him in a powerful miasma of Guerlain's *Mitsouko* and hot hide.

" Whatever are you glowering at ? Have I got a smudge on my nose ? "

" I was admiring the colour of your lipstick."

" I'm glad you approve. It's Ronsard's latest: *Sangre de Toro*. Rather juicily sadistic, don't you think ? "

Guy nodded and sonorously intoned. " A las cinco de la tarde . . ."

"Quite so," replied Myra, squeezing his hand, "but it's only half past one now, and I'm uncommonly peckish. There'll be plenty of time after luncheon for apt quotations from the poets."

They sat at a window-table overlooking the full sweep of the bay. Myra who, like all beautiful women, took her eating seriously, sharpened her appetite with two rousing Picons whilst she studied the food-list, a veritable placard, of the size and splendour of an illuminated address.

Guy, sipping his dry vermouth, watched her out of the corner of his eye. At the moment, she seemed reasonably quiescent, but all his professional experience had taught him never to under-rate any opponent, especially a torrid Latin brune. He was under no illusion. The superb mammal lounging opposite to him had not invited him to a tête-à-tête luncheon merely for the pleasure of listening to his conversation.

When he refused the wine and asked for lemon-squash, Myra was greatly concerned. "But this is most unconvivial of you, Guy. Surely you're not on a diet, with a figure like yours."

"No ; but I rarely drink wine in the middle of the day, being, as I am, a man of simple and abstemious habits."

"None of your mocking irony, please. Believe me, I've heard all about that sybaritic flat, and the black Bristol and the three different tailors for coats, weskits and trousers."

"That's just professional window-dressing. You can't charge my scale of fees and live in a goat-hair tent in Kew Gardens." As one of my customers remarked the other day : 'It was worth two hundred guineas just to see the look in the cab-driver's eye when I gave him your address.' "

Myra shook her head. "It won't do, Guy. I'm quite certain that there's some fascinating mystery behind all this."

"Behind all what?"

"This austerity programme of yours. I just don't understand how you, of all people, come to be staying in a second-class family hotel and consorting with frisky provincial grocers on a diet of lemon-squash."

He gave her the grin. "And I just don't understand how you come to be staying in a four-star luxury hotel and consorting with frisky cosmopolitan millionaires on a fifty-pound travel allowance."

She fanned her unbelievable eyelashes. "These things can always be arranged if one knows the right people."

"I suppose so—if one knows them well enough."

"I think," she murmured, "that you have a rather squalid mind. And I don't much care for cheap cynicism."

"No, I don't suppose you do, since 'cheap cynicism', in my experience, is the name which women invariably give to the truth."

After this preliminary measuring of blades the rest of the meal passed off peacefully enough. Myra turned the conversation into more impersonal channels, discoursing pithily on a variety of diverting topics ranging from Etruscan funerary sculpture to a curious experience in the Burns Memorial Museum with an exiled ornament of the Muslim Brotherhood endowed with an enquiring turn of mind and unlimited territorial ambitions.

By the time they reached the fruit, Guy was feeling distinctly impatient and not a little guilty. He had set aside several valuable hours from his investigations simply for the personal satisfaction of teaching Myra

Sheath a sharp lesson ; and now it seemed that he had done so to no purpose, for she showed no sign of renewing her assaults upon him. Either she had already given him up as a dead loss ; or she was trying to score a negative victory by provoking him to an amorous duel and then refusing to engage. In either case he would have wasted precious time on an opponent unworthy of his metal.

He looked at his watch and decided to get away as soon as possible. He had accepted her challenge and honour was satisfied.

Her sultry voice, with its grape-bloom dusting of hoarseness, interrupted his straying thoughts. "I think it would be rather nice if we had the coffee upstairs. So much more restful than this noisy restaurant. Unless, of course, you'd rather not . . ."

"An excellent notion," replied Guy smoothly. "I should be delighted."

He smiled appreciatively to himself as he followed her across the hall. So this was it. A very neat piece of delayed timing. Obviously she was a first-class tactician who could switch at will from the lightning all-out assault to the carefully prepared set-piece battle, and who refused to be rushed into mounting her attack prematurely.

She was installed in a top-price suite on the first floor, overlooking the frontal terrace of the hotel. Guy could not suppress a twinge of professional jealousy. He prided himself upon knowing a thing or two about living comfortably, but Myra, very obviously, knew a thing or three. The big square sitting-room was beautifully appointed and decorated with masses of hot-house flowers ; and the deeply piled carpet lapped around his feet like quicksand.

"I think," she said, when the coffee arrived, "that

we'll have it in my bedroom. I've got a teeny touch of headache, and I'd like to lie down. It won't embarrass you, I hope?"

"But, of course not. Whatever you say."

She picked up the tray and moved to the communicating-door. "I'll just get into something more comfortable. I shan't be a minute."

This was much more the sort of thing he had been expecting. Coffee upstairs, a touch of migraine, coffee in the bedroom, a change into something more comfortable. Not very original, perhaps. But then love, like war, offered little scope for originality. It was simply a matter of adapting the few old threadbare gambits to each new situation. Timing and flexibility were the essence.

He lit a cigarette, strolled over to the tall, open windows and looked down onto the terrace twenty feet below. Among the coffee-drinkers at the umbrella-shaded tables he noticed the aged lady in the wheeled chair; and she, glancing up from her book, noticed him. In response to his tentative bow she gave him a genial smile, followed by an atrocious wink and a most unladylike gesture.

"Jolly good luck to you sir! And don't forget the lipstick."

Simultaneously a husky murmur sounded from the bedroom. Guy flicked a trace of ash from his lapel, adjusted his tie, waded through the carpet and opened the door.

Two things were apparent at a single glance. First, that Myra had indeed "got into something more comfortable": second, that she was already well on the way to getting out of it.

She pointed to an armchair drawn up by the night-table. "Come here beside me, and then we can settle down to a nice cosy chat."

Guy sat down, crossed his legs, joined the tips of his fingers and raised his eyebrows in an expression of courteous attention.

Myra averted her face and forced up a hint of a blush. "I hope you don't mind my receiving you like this. But I don't suppose it's the first time you've been entertained by a lady in her wrapper."

"Pray don't give it a second thought. All my female clients do it habitually. It is the customary preliminary to trying to persuade me to knock ten per cent off my bill."

Myra fluttered her eyelids. "And do they often succeed?"

"Invariably."

"But how perfectly sweet of you, Guy. I'd no idea you were so . . . so responsive."

"Well, I never like to refuse a lady any reasonable request; and since my fee always includes a ten per cent wrapper-charge, anyway, it all comes to much the same thing in the end. Except, of course, that the customer has the satisfaction of thinking that she's getting my services on the cheap, and I have the pleasure of giving her that satisfaction."

Myra raised herself on one elbow and leaned across to pour the coffee, an operation which materially increased the scope of the scenery.

"Cold-blooded monster," she sighed. "I was just beginning to hope that those discouraging stories I've heard about you weren't true after all."

"What discouraging stories?"

"That in spite of the notorious charm and old-world courtesy, you're completely heartless."

"How very disoblging. Who told you that?"

"They all say so. Magdalen Cone, and Clare Crest and Bessie Galway-Blazer . . ."

"But they're all customers of mine ; and that being so, our association is, of course, entirely impersonal. So many of my ladies seem unable or unwilling to understand that the relationship between the Negotiator and his client is exactly the same as that between doctor and patient. The two avocations have much in common and are governed by the same strict code of professional conduct. Sympathy, understanding and encouragement, yes. But nothing more."

Myra turned on her side to face him, thereby adroitly adding several further features of outstanding interest to the landscape. "And what about ladies who *aren't* your customers?"

"Professional etiquette no longer applies, and I am free to enjoy all the amenities of normal social intercourse."

"I see. So you aren't completely indifferent to women, as Mrs. Cone and all the others declare?"

"Far from it. As a matter of fact, it is my privilege to be on terms of the closest intimacy with a great many very charming women."

The bed creaked softly.

"Exactly how close?"

"Oh, the usual routine, you know. Cosy little luncheons, and long healthy walks in the country and an occasional night at the dogs."

"And nothing more, Guy? Nothing more? Never the teeniest touch of love?"

"Not for many a long, long year, alas."

"But why? I don't understand . . ."

"If you spent a morning in my consulting-room, you would."

She moued sulkily. "More of your cheap cynicism. You disappoint me, Guy."

"You are entirely mistaken. Far from being a cynic,

I am an incofrigible romantic. It is not that I have learned too much about women to fall in love with them. It is that I have learned too little—the sad fact being that there is so little *to* learn.” He finished his coffee and put aside his cup. “For me, like Sainte-Beuve, love is inconceivable without mystery. Random the Romantic yearns for enigmatic creatures of subtle motives, complicated emotions and unpredictable reactions. But Random the Negotiator meets only very elementary creatures whose motives are uncommonly crude, whose emotions are not complicated but merely unstable, and whose reactions in any given circumstances are predictable with a mathematical accuracy. This unhappy conflict between Fact and Fancy darkens a temperament naturally sunny, and permanently inhibits the free flow of my affections.”

Myra scrutinised him narrowly for several seconds. Then she swayed towards him and looked into his eyes. “I don’t believe a word of it. I think Mrs. Cone and all the others are quite right. You’re completely heartless.”

“I assure you . . .”

“You can keep your assurances. I intend to find out for myself.”

Before he could draw back, she slid her hand inside his jacket, and her fingers, caressing his chest, touched the knife-hilt on his left ribs. With a quick dexterous movement she flicked the weapon out and recoiled on the bed.

“Why, Guy, what a horrible looking thing! What on earth are you carrying this for?”

It was an awkward situation, and he automatically covered-up with flippancy. “It’s the Boy Scout in me. Getting about as I do, here, there and everywhere, I never know when I may need to kindle a camp-fire,

or fashion a rude boomerang or extract a desert-rose thorn from a camel's hoof."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're carrying this for some good reason. It's all of a piece with the rest of your extraordinary behaviour. That grim hotel, and your grocer pal, and lemon-squash at luncheon and that repulsive tie. Do tell me what you're up to, Guy. I'm sure it's something terribly exciting and dangerous. Are you moving in on the local smuggling racket? Or have you taken-on for a secret agent or something?"

He drooped his eyelids and smiled still more waggishly. "You over-rate me and under-rate yourself. Don't forget that I think you're a bad, dangerous woman, and that I don't trust myself alone with you." He casually held out his hand. "May I have my cutlery back, please?"

She shook her head, slipped the knife under the pillows and lay back. "Not until you tell me what goes on. I believe you're mixed-up in something very naughty, Guy; and I'm determined to find out what it is."

Guy did some quick thinking. This stupid contre-temps could be dangerous. Myra was no fool, and it was obvious that her curiosity was roused. If she persisted in badgering him, he would have to stall her off; in which case she might soon begin to suspect that he really was mixed-up in something sinister—and very shortly thereafter he would be the centre of gossip in every bar and café in San Felipe. There was only one thing to do: end the incident as smoothly and quickly as possible.

He wagged a roguish forefinger at her and started to reply, then broke off and jumped to his feet, pointing to the clock on the night-table.

"Good lord! Is that the time? Half past three

already. I must fly. I've promised to meet some friends in Barcelona this evening." He reached towards the pillows. "If you'll kindly return my toothpick, I'll be on my way."

But Myra was not to be sidetracked so easily. She took his hand and drew him towards her. "But you can't go yet, Guy. I won't hear of it. We're only just beginning to get to know one another."

"I'm terribly sorry, but I really must be off. My cab is ordered for four o'clock, and I've still got to bathe and change. Very many thanks for your kind hospitality and for the pleasure of your charming company . . ."

He tried to free himself and step back, but she clung to his hand. "And is that all?" she whispered huskily. "Not even just one teeny-weeny goodbye kiss?"

He contemplated the manifold splendours so ungrudgingly exhibited for his entertainment. It would be churlish indeed to snub so generous a hostess—especially after such an excellent luncheon. He inclined from the waist and pecked her briskly on the forehead.

Myra gave him a swooning look of reproach. "So you don't love me at all? Not the tiniest little bit?"

"Really, now! These leading questions . . ."

"I think," she said, suddenly driving the points of her nails into his palms, "that you're the cruellest man I've ever met. You *are* heartless. Absolutely and completely heartless."

"You malign me," replied Guy patiently. "As I've told you already, I am the victim of my own romantic disposition. I say again, and with all the emphasis at my command: Love, for me, is inconceivable without mystery . . ." He glanced along the bed. ". . . and you must agree, in all fairness, that there's a marked

paucity of mystery around these parts this afternoon. Sainte-Beuve . . .”

“Was an ass,” interrupted Myra viciously. “Chamfort was the boy who knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That love is the contact of two skins.”

With this, she raised her arms, clasped her hands behind his shoulders and pulled him smartly downwards. The side of the low bed caught against his shins and, levered off balance, he subsided on top of her.

Guy was not amused. Accustomed to dealing with ladies of spirit and perseverance, he was always prepared to bear with any reasonable manifestation of temperament. But an unseemly rough-and-tumble of this kind was altogether too much. Gently but firmly he grasped her wrists and sought to part her embrace. But her arms locked still more forcefully around his shoulders. It was clear that he must have recourse to more drastic methods. Releasing her wrists, he reached down and tickled her on the ribs. The effect was instantaneous. Myra gave a cry of dismay, wriggled convulsively and broke her grip to snatch at his hands.

As Guy deftly disengaged himself and started to get to his feet, his glance fell on the dressing-table looking-glass on the opposite side of the room. For a split second he froze solid, staring at the reflected image. The Hairless Catalan was standing right behind him with his knife poised to strike.

As the knife drove down at his back, Guy flung himself sideways and rolled over on the carpet, the glittering blade ripping through his jacket and searing the skin of his right shoulder like a white-hot wire.

He was on his feet in an instant, and his hand automatically shot to his left side for the knife that was lying under Myra's pillows. Deprived of his own weapon,

he sprang backwards and snatched up the dressing-table chair as Pedro moved cautiously towards him, silent, cat-like, his killer's eyes fixed in their dead blank stare.

Guy's mind worked with icy precision. He saw in a flash the appalling blunder he had committed : the very blunder that Sir Humphrey had trusted him to avoid. He had got himself entangled with a woman and, what was infinitely worse, with a murderously jealous lover. A fracas like this, whichever way it ended, could wreck his whole mission. There was only one thing for it : get out.

He fainted at Pedro with his upraised chair and darted sideways to the far side of the bed upon which Myra was crouching wide-eyed and motionless. He paused to gather himself, and then, as Pedro came in with a rush, he flung the chair full in his face.

In a couple of bounds he was through the open windows and vaulting over the balcony to the terrace below. He was already running strongly when his feet touched-down on the marble paving. Swerving and jinking between the tables, he streaked across the terrace like a wing-threequarter in full cry, soared over the balustrade with a couple of feet to spare and plunged down the flank of the headland, leaping from rock to rock like a mountain goat.

From somewhere above him he heard the familiar cracked voice of the amiable old lady in the wheeled chair.

"Steady there, young fellow ! She won't eat you."

8

“Good afternoon, sir. Warm weather for mountaineering.”

Guy excavated himself from the pocket of coarse grey sand into which he had fallen head foremost and tottered to his feet. Scattered on a rock six paces to his left was Consuela's white-haired gentleman friend. He was dressed in threadbare khaki-drill slacks and a faded blue shirt. A porrón of red wine stood in the shade at his elbow, and his slender fingers were toying with a flute.

Guy coughed up a fountain of grit. “Good afternoon. I must apologise for disturbing you.”

“Don't mention it, my dear fellow. I always enjoy these little surprises. They stimulate the nerves and add zest to one's declining years. I was merely idling away the dog hours, as is my wont, with a little wine and music.” He held out the porrón. “Help yourself. Your need, I fancy, is greater than mine. You appear to be bleeding to death.”

Guy pulled off his ripped jacket and winced as he fingered his bloodstained shirt. “There's something in what you say. Such are the hazards of tête-à-tête luncheon parties.”

The old gentleman stood up with a look of concern. “Will you allow me to examine the damage? It seems to be quite considerable. . . . The name, by the way, is Vervain. Felix Vervain.”

"And mine is Guy Random."

He stripped off tie, shirt and vest, and submitted his shoulder to Felix's inspection.

"H'm. She *must* have been a great big hungry girl. Fortunately, however, it's only superficial. But it needs a proper dressing on it. If you care to step along to my cottage, I shall be delighted to tidy you up."

"That's very civil of you, sir ; but I don't want to make a nuisance of myself. No doubt I can find a chemist somewhere."

"Not at all. I won't hear of you traipsing two miles into town with a slit like that in your hide. My place is only a few minutes from here, and I have all the necessary kit. I hope you will give me the pleasure of offering you a cup of tea."

A temporary bandage of handkerchiefs was applied to the wound, and they set off, Guy carrying his tattered wardrobe over his arm.

Felix led the way, skipping so nimbly over the jagged rocks by the water's edge, that Guy was hard pressed to keep up with him. After emerging from the little cove below the hotel terrace, they scrambled along the base of the headland for a quarter of a mile, then started on a strenuous diagonal climb up the cliff face. When at last they reached the top, Guy noticed that Felix, in spite of his advanced years, was still breathing evenly through his nose. His passion for sardana dancing obviously kept him in first-class trim.

For several minutes they followed a narrow sandy track through a scatter of pine trees, climbing slightly all the time until they had reached the highest level of the headland. And there, tucked away in a shallow hollow, was a small single-storey house which blended so quietly with its surroundings that it seemed to have grown up out of its native limestone.

"Originally two peasant dwellings," explained Felix. "I bought them for a song twenty years ago, bashed them into one and added a few basic comforts. Result, a cosy little retreat for a bachelor of simple tastes and meditative temperament."

"I congratulate you. A magnificent view of the bay combined with perfect privacy."

"Yes, it's an agreeable situation. Apart from the hotel down there on the point, there's nothing within a mile of me. On the other hand, when I do feel the need for company, a brisk twenty minutes' walk gets me into town. But come inside before you pass away."

The door opened straight into a big central room with a tiled floor and white roughcast walls. It was comfortably, if sparsely, furnished; easy chairs by a charcoal stove, a dining-table by the seaward window, some very good rugs, abundant bookshelves, some charmingly amateurish water-colours of the local scenery. Over the hearth hung a half-length portrait in oils of a ravishingly beautiful young woman with golden hair and glittering sapphire eyes.

Felix produced a comprehensive first-aid outfit and speedily dealt with Guy's injury, cleaning, disinfecting and binding the wound with firm, deft movements.

"Many thanks. A most professional job. A doctor couldn't have done it better."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am one." He twinkled roguishly. "And *not* removed from the register, as you're doubtless suspecting. Pray be seated, dear boy. I'll knock up a brew, and then we can settle down to a nice long chat."

Guy lay back in his chair and examined the portrait of the young woman. It seemed vaguely familiar. He was still scrutinising it when Felix returned.

"Aha! You recognise her?"

"Well, I couldn't be certain, but . . ."

"You're quite right. It's the notorious Sophy Cleft : the inimitable, the one and only Sophy. That was done over thirty years ago when she was in her early twenties and had all the roaring-boys of five continents swarming round her like bluebottles in a colander."

"But, of course. I see the likeness perfectly now. Didn't she marry last year? I seem to remember the papers were full of it."

"Correct. After a lifetime's endeavour, she finally got her hooks in old Evelyn Chancery." Felix chuckled delightedly. "Lead's the poor devil a dog's life, I understand."

He poured the tea : Lapsang Souchong, with a slice of lemon, in exquisite Rockingham cups. Then he coughed discreetly.

"Forgive me if I seem inquisitive, but your name strikes a chord. May I enquire if you are Guy Random, the eminent Negotiator?"

"The same. But how did you know?"

"Oh, I'm not completely out of touch with the great world. I still correspond with many of my old cronies, especially dear Wally Penge. He has mentioned you several times in his letters, and always, I may say, in terms of the highest regard and esteem."

"Well, upon my soul ! So you know Sir Walter?"

"Known him for years. When I practised in Harley Street, in days gone by, we had a most harmonious understanding. And a mighty good thing we made out of it, too. We used to bat the rich women back and forth between us like ping-pong balls ; and every time they bounced we picked up another thumping great fee. Wally specialised on the social angle, and I invented the new diseases. And, though I say it myself, I cooked-up some notable money-spinners in my time."

Felix sank his voice, laid his hand on his bosom and spoke with unconcealed pride. "It may interest you to learn, Random, that it was I who invented the slipped-disc."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I fudged that, one up way back in '35, just before I retired. And it's taken the rest of the boys another twenty years to get around to it." He shook his head. "These youngsters have no imagination."

"I can't help wondering," said Guy, "why you chose to retire so early, especially as you were doing so well in your profession."

"My retirement was due to a combination of circumstances. Firstly, I fell madly in love with Sophy Cleft who turned me down and broke my heart. Secondly, I rather over-reached myself professionally when I popularised the rotating kidney. There was a hell of a lot of money in it, but the work involved was crushing. Night after night I was dragged from my bed to pacify rich women whose kidneys, they averred, were whirling round like Catherine-wheels, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. Thirdly, a distant relative suddenly passed on, leaving me a modest fortune, invested, praise the Lord, in first-class American industrials. So, what with a broken heart, overwork and my financial windfall, I decided that the time had come to make a clean break and start life anew. And I've never regretted it. I spend my summers here, and in the winter I move south to another little nest I have near Målaga."

Guy looked enviously at the serenely smiling figure lounging opposite to him. Felix Vervain had every appearance of being that rarest of all creatures : a truly happy man.

"I must say I admire your strength of mind. You certainly did make a clean break. The contrast between

this set-up and the life of a fashionable London physician is drastic indeed. Do you never feel lonely or bored ? ”

“ Good gracious, no ! I have a wide circle of acquaintances in all walks of life ; I have my books, my music and my painting ; above all, I have my pet hobby, a lifetime’s study in itself.”

“ May I enquire what it is ? ”

“ The art of scent-making, including all the manifold aspects thereof : its history ; its techniques, both ancient and modern ; its practical applications, physiological and psychological alike.”

“ An unusual hobby, if I may say so.”

“ Perhaps so ; but a most absorbing one. The sense of smell offers a fascinating field for investigation. Generally speaking it is the least used and most neglected of our faculties. Yet I have long been convinced that, potentially, it is the most responsive of all the five senses with which we are endowed.”

Guy raised a quizzical eyebrow. “ Responsive ? What do you mean exactly ? ”

“ Precisely what I say. If you know how to set about it, you can affect a person more powerfully through the nose than by any other method.”

“ Surely you exaggerate ? ” protested Guy. “ I admit that one’s sense of smell can play some funny tricks, particularly with the memory. We all know, for example, that a whiff of scent can conjure up long-forgotten scenes with extraordinary vividness. And I’ve heard it said that a sleeping man in a burning house will smell the fire before he hears it. But those, I imagine, are special cases. I certainly can’t agree with you that the sense of smell can be ranked, say, with sight and hearing—as you seem to imply, if I understand you rightly.”

Felix picked up the teapot and replenished the cups. "I'm not implying it. I've proved it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say I've proved it."

Guy prodded the lemon in his tea. This was getting a little embarrassing. Plainly, his host was something of an eccentric with a particularly buzzy bee in his bonnet.

"I can see you're sceptical," said Felix. "You don't believe me."

"Well, I . . ."

"In spite of having seen the proof with your own eyes."

Guy was quite at a loss. The old gentleman was possibly intending to be humorous. Yet he appeared to be very much in earnest. It was all rather awkward. He decided that it would be best to answer frankly.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Vervain, that I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"The Tears of Venus, my dear fellow. The scent that makes any and every woman completely irresistible to the male sex."

"What!"

"Come, come, Random. You're not going to deny the evidence of your own eyes, surely? You saw what happened to Consuela last night. I must thank you and Mr. Spindle very warmly, by the way, for helping the poor girl out of a tight corner. It was my fault entirely. I gave her a drop too much. Fortunately, I hadn't added the fixative, so the stuff evaporated pretty quickly. Otherwise, I fear, the child might well have been torn asunder."

Guy put down his cup and looked directly into his host's sparkling blue eyes. This was no time to beat about the bush. "I suggest, sir, that this little joke has

just about run its course. I don't mind having my leg pulled up to a point. But if it goes on much longer, I shall run a grave risk of being mistaken for an egg-bound stork."

Felix looked deeply pained. "My dear Random! I may be a doddering old hermit, but I have not forgotten how to behave myself in civilised company. It is not my habit to invite a guest into my house and then make mock of him. Excuse me one moment."

He got up, crossed the room and vanished through a doorway at the far end. Guy had a brief glimpse of a laboratory-type work-bench equipped with rows of heavy glass jars, bulbous retorts and racks of test-tubes. A moment later Felix reappeared with a small bottle containing an amber-coloured fluid. The stopper was carefully secured by a strand of wire wound around the neck. He resumed his seat and put the bottle on the tray.

"That's the stuff, Random. A woman has only to wear a couple of drops of that, and she'll have every male in the locality clambering all over her; even to the point, as you saw last night, of violent physical assault."

He sat back with an air of quiet satisfaction, crossed his long, thin legs and sipped his tea.

Guy did some quick thinking. There was now no doubt about it: he was at grips with a crackpot. Felix Vervain, like many another English gentleman of ancient lineage, had an outsize bat at large in his belfry. And his obsession, it seemed, was even more farciful than most.

Guy's first impulse was to make his escape as quickly as possible. But that, he decided, would be discourteous. Having accepted the old boy's hospitality, one ought to do the civil thing and show some interest

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in his hobby, however crazy. He settled back and lit a cigarette.

"The Tears of Venus. A very beautiful name, Mr. Vervain. And, if all you claim is true, a very remarkable invention. I congratulate you."

Felix shrugged deprecatingly. "You do me too much honour, Mr. Random. I cannot claim to have invented it. I have merely rediscovered it after a lapse of many centuries."

"This sounds an interesting story. I should like to hear it."

"Very well. But I won't bore you with all the details, which would fill a fair-sized book. I will simply summarise the facts as briefly as possible."

"In ancient times, as you possibly know, the art of scent-making was highly developed. Throughout the luxury-loving civilisations of the Mediterranean basin scents were greatly esteemed for a variety of purposes : medicinally, as stimulants or sedatives ; hygienically, as a defence against harmful infections and so forth. But their prime use, of course, was as aphrodisiacs."

"As love-tonics, you mean, to inflame the animal passions and set the boys alight ?"

"Exactly. And this was particularly the case in the pleasure-mad days of Imperial Rome."

"My word, yes ! There were some frisky doxies on the trot at that time, and no error. Poor old Claudius's little handful, for example, the indefatigable Messalina . . ."

"Quite so. Messalina. You choose an apt illustration, because it was for her that this scent was invented. You see, contrary to the general belief, Messalina was not a beautiful woman. In fact, she was extremely plain, with a face like the proverbial backside of a bus—or, to be more accurate, the backside of a four-

horse chariot. At the same time, however, she was extremely . . . affectionate."

"A vexing state of affairs."

"Too true. But it was solved by her private cosmetics expert, a freed Egyptian slave. After years of patient experiment, he produced this supreme, irresistible masterpiece, The Tears of Venus. The result is known to every schoolboy: Messalina's still unbroken record score of twenty-five not out."

"I trust he was suitably rewarded."

"He was rewarded by instant strangulation; and his dismembered carcass was thrown into the river Tiber. An interesting example of the early development of the law of copyright."

Felix paused to blow a contemplative smoke-ring. "With the death of Messalina, the secret formula was lost; but not irretrievably so, I'm happy to say. For, centuries later, it turned up again; this time, as you might expect, in the possession of the Borgias."

Guy nodded. "You don't surprise me. Just the sort of plaything that lot would get hold of. And then?"

"It was lost again. Once more all trace of it vanished completely—until last year, when I rediscovered it myself."

As Guy started to speak, Felix cut him short. "I regret, Mr. Random, that I am not at liberty to tell you exactly how I came by the secret. It is a matter of some delicacy. I would remind you, however, that the Borgias, rightly called Borja, were Spaniards; and, though long established in Italy, they always maintained the closest ties with their native land."

"So I believe."

"Some months ago, I was the guest of a certain most ancient and illustrious Castilian family; and during

my stay I spent much of my time browsing through their ancestral archives. There I came across a letter written by none other than Lucrezia Borgia herself, and addressed to the eldest daughter of my host's family at that time. In it there was revealed the full history of The Tears of Venus, together with what appeared to be the formula for making it. I realised at once that I had lighted upon something of fabulous interest ; something which called for long and patient study in complete privacy. It was obvious, moreover, that my host was unaware of the existence of the document."

"So you pinched it."

Felix winced and screwed-up his eyes. "I found it in my pocket when I got home. If my behaviour seems a little irregular, I would remind you of the old proverb : What the Eye doesn't see, the Heart doesn't grieve over."

Guy repressed a chuckle and nodded understandingly. "A very sensible point of view. And so ?"

"Then, Mr. Random, I started my experiments. And I tell you quite frankly that, had I foreseen the arduous task I was setting myself, I would never have undertaken it. Six solid months of ceaseless effort and heartbreaking disappointment ; not to mention a financial outlay which I could ill afford. But finally my patience was rewarded. The result stands before you in that bottle : the authentic brew prepared for Messalina."

"But, surely, if you had the formula, it was a fairly simple matter to make it up."

"On the contrary. When I began the work I found that I was up against some appalling difficulties. First, the scent contains no less than fifty different ingredients, many of which were extremely difficult to

obtain. One of them, indeed, I all but despaired of getting hold of at all. Suffice it to say that I had to make a lengthy visit to a certain North African seaport, and there ingratiate myself with some extremely industrious young ladies."

"How very interesting."

"It was. Not to say educational. But that was not all. Having obtained my raw materials—I use the phrase advisedly—I then found that the formula was incomplete. The ingredients were listed all right, but there was no indication of the proportions in which they must be mixed. I was compelled, therefore, to work by trial-and-error. And you don't have to be an Einstein or a Hoyle to appreciate the number of possible combinations arising out of fifty different items. In the end I got it ; more by good luck than good management, as I readily admit."

"Splendid ! I congratulate you."

"You speak too soon. There was still another daunting problem in front of me. As you probably know, one of the most important factors in any scent is the fixing agent. It's no use inventing a gorgeous smell if the stuff evaporates and loses its punch within a few minutes of application. And it's worth remembering that these dopes are customarily applied to skin that is pretty hot, or intends to become so in the near future."

"Agreed."

"Well, the formula, as I had it, showed no fixative at all. It just wasn't listed. This may have been an oversight on Lucrezia's part. But I'm inclined to suspect that there never was one. That, I fancy, was the one thing that our ingenious friend, the Egyptian slave, never got around to."

"Oh, but surely ! What about the evaporation in a score of twenty-five not out ?"

"I can only suggest that she renewed the dose between overs."

Felix tenderly fondled his cigar. "That is now no longer necessary, I'm glad to report. Only last week I solved the problem. I have succeeded where Messalina's expert failed. I have found a fixative that will hold the scent without upsetting the delicate balance of its composition. In short, Mr. Random, my work is complete. In that bottle that stands before you, is an ounce of the perfected Tears of Venus, the most potent scent the world has ever known. And if you don't believe me, ask Consuela. She shared my work from start to finish."

"Really? I'm sure she was most helpful."

"Yes, indeed. She has been the guinea-pig for my tests. She comes up here from the town every Monday to muck-out the house and do the laundry. During all these weary months she has stimulated me to fresh endeavours and encouraged my fading hopes, submitting herself with unfailing patience to a thousand applications of a thousand different brews. I owe the child a great debt. It is her triumph as much as mine."

Felix reached again for the teapot and twinkled across the table. "There was no laundry done last Monday."

Guy pushed back his chair. "Well, Mr. Vervain, I shall have to be getting along. I'm most grateful for your kind hospitality. And I've greatly enjoyed hearing about your work. It is a truly remarkable story."

"Of which," said Felix, smiling genially, "you don't believe a word. Eh?"

"Well, really . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I mean to say, it's a bit much to swallow, isn't it? The irresistible scent that turns every male in

the parish into a ravening maniac . . . why, it's one of the stock jokes of the funny magazines."

"It's not so long ago, remember, that things like aeroplanes and radio and television were funny jokes. Nothing is impossible, Mr. Random. Nothing."

"Yes, I know, but . . ."

Felix shrugged and sighed. "Ah, well! There's none so blind as those that *won't* see. Even when they see Consuela being chased around town by two dozen passion-crazed tourists."

Guy was a little piqued. "Frankly, Mr. Vervain, if you want me to believe your story, you'll have to produce some stronger evidence than that. I've seen and studied Consuela at work; and, in my opinion, she's quite capable of tearing the town apart without the help of a magic scent. In fact, she'd still make a pretty good stab at it if you sprayed her from top to bottom with sulphuretted hydrogen. Furthermore, I would remind you that The Tears of Venus didn't seem to work much magic on friend Pedro. So far as he was concerned, Consuela was just a rowdy girl in her birthday suit, whom, if Les and I hadn't intervened, he would have bundled off to the police-station and clapped in the cooler."

"Quite. As I told you, I played safe for my first test in public, and omitted the fixative. By the time she took refuge in El Cortijo, the scent had lost its potency. However, I grant your first point. Consuela is a provocative little bundle by any standard. But I tell you what . . ."

"Yes?"

Felix reached across the table and tapped Guy on the chest. "I'll make you a challenge, Mr. Random. You pick any woman in San Felipe; the most repulsive you can find. Then allow me to shed two Tears of

Venus on her person—and watch the result. There ! I challenge you ! And if the scent fails to work, I'll stand you a night but in Barcelona."

Guy could not help responding to Felix's good-humoured enthusiasm. The old boy was obviously as mad as a hatter, but he was also a charming and amusing character. If encouraged to give his hobby-horse free rein, he might provide some fun.

"Very well, sir. I accept your challenge. And I can name my candidate here and now. Mrs. Beryl Spindle, our friend Leslie's wife."

"I don't know her, I'm afraid."

"You'll be afraid *what* you do. I met her this morning and I can assure you that she is the most repulsive woman I have ever met anywhere, let alone in San Felipe. If *The Tears of Venus* sets the boys on *her*, then I'll believe everything you claim for it, and twice as much again."

"Done !" cried Felix, warmly grasping Guy's hand. "When and where ?"

"Meet me at eleven o'clock tonight in El Cortijo. We'll have a few drinks, and then I'll introduce you to your patient. And I don't advise you to try and bat Beryl Spindle back and forth like a ping-pong ball. Because if you do, you'll never know what hit you."

Guy stood up and started to dress. He pulled on his torn vest and shirt and then rummaged in his jacket-pockets.

"Damnation. What a nuisance."

"What's the matter ?" enquired Felix. "Lost something ?"

"Yes. I seem to have mislaid my tie. I thought I stuffed it in my pocket."

"You probably lost it in the cove when you stripped

off. I shall be going down there again, later on, for my swim. If I find it, I'll bring it along tonight."

"Thanks. But don't put yourself to a lot of bother."

"No bother at all, my dear fellow. It's always annoying to lose one's personal belongings." He cocked his head on one side. "It has, perhaps, some sentimental value?"

Guy smiled and shook his head. "Not sentimental. Psychological would be the better word. And now I must be off. See you later."

9

THROUGHOUT luncheon Leslie's anxiety steadily increased. He was an extremely conscientious man whose success in business was largely due to his painstaking thoroughness and his reputation for absolute reliability. Indeed, his entire life had been based upon the motto which hung on the wall over his office desk. "Never bite off more than you can chew."

But that, he now suspected, was precisely what he had done. Last night, in a moment of crazy recklessness, he had involved himself in a deadly venture upon the outcome of which the fate of nations might well depend. And this morning, what was far worse, he had committed himself to a task which, Guy Random had warned him, was of the utmost importance: the shadowing of Fanny Traverse. And, as things stood at present, he clearly hadn't a hope of carrying it out.

He glanced up cautiously from his plate at the stony-faced figure sitting opposite to him. His heart sank. He had never before seen Beryl in such a vicious mood as this. He was used to her fits of sulkiness, her ceaseless nagging, her outbursts of vituperation. But this cold silent fury was something else again. Even the Glossops, sitting at the next table, were subdued and apprehensive. In his mind's ear he heard Guy's warning: "If you're going to work as a secret agent, you'll need reasonable freedom of action. I advise you to take a firm line with the spouse." And then his own criminally reckless reply: "Don't worry about that. I'll manage Beryl somehow."

The fact was, he had no more chance of managing Beryl in her present mood, than he had of managing an infuriated tigress. She had been reluctant enough before to let him off the leash. From now on, it was obvious, she wouldn't give him an inch. Quite literally, she wouldn't let him out of her sight for an instant.

Fiddling with his fruit, he looked across the crowded restaurant at the table near the door where Fanny was chattering away with two old ladies who were plainly spellbound by her frank childlike charm. She had finished her meal and had already pushed back her chair. At any moment now she would be off—off on God alone knew what devilish business. Something that might well undermine all Guy's plans and . . . and even lead to his violent death. And here he was, the man whom Guy was trusting to watch her every move, sitting helplessly by and doing nothing.

Beryl's icy rasp cut through his mounting panic. "Come along. I've finished. We'll have coffee in the lounge. Then we'll go upstairs for a rest."

Racked by remorse and guilt, Leslie followed Beryl

and the Glossops out of the restaurant, across the hall and into the cool shaded coffee-room. As they sat down at a table near the open windows, he saw Fanny come in and drop into an armchair at the opposite end. He felt a great surge of relief. For the moment, at any rate, he was reprieved. For the duration of a cup of coffee he could still keep his eye on her. And in that time something might happen to solve his predicament. Beryl might . . . might even . . . his mind recoiled from the shocking notion and quickly reshaped it. Beryl might have one of her bilious attacks or something.

The waiter took his order and then crossed the room in response to Fanny's upraised finger. Leslie, watching from behind a newspaper, saw her take pencil and notepad from her bag and scribble a few words. What was this? Some subtle plot going on under his very nose? A fresh pang of anxiety shot through him. Then, to his amazement, Fanny gave him a guarded wink, held up the slip of paper and passed it to the waiter.

A few moments later the coffee arrived and Leslie paid with a fifty-peseta bill. The man turned away to count out the change, and when he handed it over Leslie saw an edge of white paper protruding from the bundle of notes. He looked quickly round the table. Beryl and Mrs. Glossop were preparing to write their daily quota of picture-postcards. Mr. Glossop, under the pretence of dozing, was squinting up the skirts of a sizzling French matron deployed on the sofa.

Retiring behind his newspaper, Leslie pecked hurriedly at the smuggled message. "Come for a swim."

Again he was thrown into an agony of indecision. This put him in a worse position than ever. Now there was even less excuse for falling down on his job. He had been detailed to keep an eye on Fanny Traverse,

and here she was positively inviting him to do so. If he failed to grasp this opportunity he would be guilty not merely of dereliction of duty, but of something not far short of deliberate treachery. But how was he to manage it? How, in Heaven's name, was he to get away?

In his desperation he lowered his paper slightly and looked across the room. She was smiling at him expectantly, her eyebrows raised. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly and nodded towards Beryl. Fanny's reply was an even broader grin, followed by more quick work with pencil and notepad.

Leslie hesitated for a moment and then pulled himself together. The risks were appalling, but they must be accepted. She seemed determined to play right into his hands. If he let the chance slip, he would never be able to look himself in the face again.

He gulped down his coffee and beckoned the waiter. Beryl looked up sharply from her postcards.

"Another cup, Leslie? Are you wise? It's very opening, you know, particularly after omelette."

"Quite right," said Mrs. Glossop. "I never let Cuthbert take coffee after egg. It always goes straight through him. Like lightning!"

"I'll be all right," muttered Leslie. "It'll do me good. Got a bit of a headache."

Beryl shrugged. "Very well, then. But don't come complaining to me if you get the stomach-ache."

The previous routine was repeated. From Leslie the waiter crossed to Fanny, took the pencilled note and duly presented it concealed in another bundle of change.

This time Leslie was forced to proceed with even greater caution, for Beryl and Mrs. Glossop had abandoned their postcards for intestinal conversation ;

whilst Cuthbert—the French matron having uncooperatively crossed her legs—was eagerly searching for fresh wonders to behold. Indeed, Leslie had almost finished his second cup of coffee before he found a chance to scan the second message. This time it was longer. “I’ll wait on the corner, same as last night. Tell her you want to go somewhere.”

Again he peered over the top of his newspaper, and his heart turned turtle as he saw Fanny rise from her chair and make for the door. It was now or never. If he accepted her invitation he would be able to neutralise her for a whole afternoon, and perhaps glean some priceless information. But if he let her go off on her own, God alone knew what she might be up to. He had a sudden appalling vision of Guy Random’s corpse floating out there in the bay, with a terrible knife-wound in the back.

As if impelled by some exterior force, he jumped to his feet, thrusting back his chair so violently that it overturned with a crash. Beryl jerked upright in her seat.

“What’s the matter with you, Leslie?”

He started to move away. “Shan’t be long. Back in a few minutes.”

Beryl caught him by the arm and halted him. “Now, then! Out with it! What’s the game?”

“I . . . I want to go somewhere.”

“You do, do you? Well, you’re not going *anywhere*, not without me. And that’s flat!”

Leslie’s voice cracked on a hysterical falsetto. “The lavatory, dammit . . . the toilet . . . the W.C.!”

This impassioned outburst shook even Beryl’s ruthless determination. She became aware of the curious glances from the neighbouring tables, and released Leslie’s arm.

"All right. There's no need to shout it about all over the place. I told you what would happen if you had that second* cup of coffee. Now just sit down quietly. When I've finished these postcards, we'll go upstairs."

Leslie's voice was a parched whisper. "I can't wait."

"What?"

"I can't wait, I tell you!"

Beryl gave him a penetrating stare. His extreme agitation, the agonised expression in his eyes could not be ignored. She shrugged irritably.

"Very well, then. Though it's a pity a man your age can't control himself for a few minutes." She pointed through the doorway. "There's one just across the hall. *And don't be long.*"

As Leslie darted across the room he heard Mrs. Glossop's voice behind him. "It's the same with Cuthbert. Always goes straight through him. Like lightning!"

He dashed through the hall, intercepting an encouraging grin from the waiter, and shot out into the street. Fanny, waiting on the opposite corner, shook her linked hands above her head in a gesture of triumph, and greeted him with a shrill catcall. Ten seconds later they were safely buried in the maze of narrow alleys behind the hotel.

Fanny slowed the pace to a comfortable stroll, hitched her beach-bag over one shoulder and patted him on the back.

"Well played indeed, sir! I knew you could do it if you really tried. All the same, I feel a bit guilty about breaking up your party."

"That's all right. There wasn't any party. It's just that Beryl—that's the wife—keeps a . . . a pretty tight hand on me."

"Ah, I see. Bad luck. Not that I altogether blame her, I must say." She gave him a smile that liquefied his spine. "I'd do the same in her place, I fancy."

Leslie flushed with pleasure. "You would?"

"Too true, m'boy. Believe me, I watched you sponging up the booze last night. And when we came off that dance-floor, I felt like the keyboard of a grand-piano after Liszt's second Hungarian Rhapsody."

He smiled down at her archly. "Really, now! It wasn't as bad as all that."

She slipped her hand under his arm and gave him a frolicsome pinch. "Come, come, Les! It's no use your looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. You can't deceive me. I know a hot numeral when I see one. *And feel one.*"

Leslie glowed under her badinage, with its unmistakable overtones of flattery and admiration. How often, in his day-dreams behind the shop counter, had he pictured himself as the dashing and dissolute town-rake, playing havoc with beautiful and sophisticated women. And now it was happening in actual fact. This ravishing creature, straight out of the glossiest of fashion-magazines, was telling him in so many words that he was a regular rackety tearaway, an irresistible lady-killer. He automatically threw back his shoulders, and a touch of triumphant male swagger appeared in his gait.

She released his arm and led the way down another side-street. "Come on. I know all the short cuts around these parts. This brings us out by the cork-factory at the end of the waterfront. I suggest we keep *out* of the way for a while."

"Where are we going?"

"To a nice private little spot I found yesterday

afternoon. It's a bit of a walk, I'm afraid, but it's worth it when you get there."

Presently they were padding up a long steep gradient, leaving the outskirts of the town behind them. The sunlight beat back off the white flinty road with a blinding glare; the fierce dry heat struck up from the concrete sidewalk like a gust from the ovens of hell.

Leslie's breathing began to labour. Sweat started from every pore of his tubby body. He took off his linen jacket, opened his shirt to the waist and put on his sun-glasses.

"Those things are just a waste of time and money," said Fanny. "A racket worked up by the shopkeepers. Unless there's something radically wrong with your eyes, they'll soon adjust themselves to the strong light. What I say is, if you want the sun, then take it neat. Like gin."

Leslie looked at her with a touch of irritation. Far from suffering under the heat, like himself, she was obviously revelling in it, lounging along in a relaxed blissful trance. From time to time she lifted her chin, thrust out her bosom and sighed rapturously, offering herself to the full impact of the searing glare.

"Well, it may suit you," he muttered faintly, "but it's a damn-sight too hot for my taste. How much farther is this place of yours?"

Fanny emerged from her coma and surveyed him sympathetically. "Why, you poor darling, you're all of a muck-sweat, I do declare. I never ought to have dragged you out on a full stomach. But cheer up! We'll soon be there."

Fanny's notion of "soon" was very different from Leslie's; and he was on the verge of collapse when, twenty minutes later, after a severe bout of hill-

climbing and rock-scrambling, they finally reached the little cove below La Conca hotel.

He sat down, panting, on a rock in a patch of shade. Not so Fanny, who dumped her beach-bag on the sand, lit one of her noisome cigarettes and gestured widely.

"A delightful little spot, don't you agree? You see where we are: right on the point of the headland. A wonderful view of the coastline and perfect privacy. Not a soul within miles, except for the bloated rich in the five-star palace up on top there. And they're far too rotted with luxury to make their way down here. Just look at the colour of the water round those rocks. Isn't it lovely? Like a peacock's neck."

She tossed away her cigarette. "I can't wait any longer, I'm going in rightaway. Come on. Or do you want to cool off a bit first?"

Leslie's irritation increased. He was abominably overheated, and his clothes were sticking to his skin. Every nerve in his body yearned for the cool caress of the green-blue water.

"Don't be silly," he snapped. "I can't go in. But don't let me stop you."

Fanny looked at him in bewilderment. "What's wrong? Too soon after luncheon? Or have you a sticky valve in the old ticker or something?"

"I can't go in," said Leslie, speaking with sarcastic patience, "for the very simple reason that I haven't got a costume. Believe me, there wasn't time to run round the hotel collecting bathing kit. I had to get out whilst the going was good."

"But that's the whole point of this place."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't need a costume here."

"What!"

"It's perfectly safe, I assure you. No chance of being

arrested and clapped into gaol or anything like that. The beach patrol never comes along here."

With this, she grasped the hem of her sun-frock, executed a nimble inside-out movement, and turned to face him—in a pair of espadrilles.

It seemed that Leslie had become one with the rock on which he sat. For the space of ten seconds he existed in a state of suspended animation. His pulse staggered and stopped dead. He ceased to breathe. The only movement in his entire body was the steady expulsion of his eyeballs from their sockets, like spheres of bubble-gum expanding from the lips of a rude child.

Then, suddenly, a long wheezing gasp escaped him. His eyelids snapped together like a pair of rat-traps. His chin thumped against his breast-bone, and his fingers plucked at his trouser-knees in a mindless palsy.

He heard the crunch of footsteps on the sand beside him. The salty tang of dried sweat stung his nostrils.

"What's the matter, ducky? Can't you manage? Here, let me do it. You men always have *such* a lot of buttons."

In a single convulsion Leslie rose off his rock into mid-air, flick-rolled through one hundred and eighty degrees, and alighted on his stomach, his hands clutching at the waistband of his slacks.

There was an astonished silence. Then Fanny's voice, charged with maternal tenderness, reached his ears through the mound of loose sand in which his face was interred.

"Why, you little pet! I do believe you're shy. I *am* sorry. If I'd known you were so sensitive, I'd have gathered the odd fig-leaf on the way down. I tell you what: I'll go in first and swim like a mad thing in the

general direction of Malta. Then you can strip at leisure. See you later."

When at last he scrambled to his knees, Fanny was two hundred yards from the shore, swimming out to sea with a beautiful slow rhythmic crawl. He sighed with relief and stood up. His immediate impulse was to retreat along the rocks to a discreet distance, and there remain until she had finished her bathe and re-dressed. But the sight of the cool water lapping around the edge of the little beach was tantalisingly attractive.

He made a quick calculation. She was obviously going a long way out. If he looked sharp about it, he would have plenty of time to take a quick dip, dry himself off in the sun and get back into his clothes before she returned. Then he could make himself scarce until she was fit to be seen. With clumsy haste he stripped off, and, crouching down in an attitude of prayer, sidled crab-fashion into the water.

Once in, he could not resist swimming a few strokes. And then a few more. The blood-warm water lulled his senses like a soporific drug. Presently he stopped swimming and turned over on his back, floating on his twenty-foot blue mattress in a trance of physical bliss. The sun beat down. The sea enfolded him in its soft, enervating caress. Time stopped.

He was roused by a brisk shout. "Hey, Les! How much longer are you going to stay out there?"

He jerked himself upright and trod water. Fanny was sitting on the sand, waving to him. He saw in a flash what had happened. Whilst he had been floating on his back, half asleep, she had swum in and was now settling down for a leisurely sunbathe. This was appalling. It had been bad enough before; but now they were both stark naked, and, sooner or later, he would have to emerge . . .

"Hey, Les! Hurry up. I want a smoke and I've run out of matches."

He missed his stroke and gulped down a mouthful of brine. What was he to do? He couldn't stay where he was indefinitely. Should he shout and ask her to go away until he had got his clothes on? He opened his mouth, and then stopped, realising how ridiculous it would sound. She would think him a silly old prude, and laugh at him again for being shy. And he couldn't bear that; especially after what she had said about his being a hot numeral.

"For pity's sake, Les! If you don't come out this instant, I'll come and drag you out."

He tried to pull himself together, striving to reason away his embarrassment. After all, he was a married man, with thirty years' experience of the physical intimacies. But there was a very big difference between the privacy of the nuptial chamber and the merciless exposure of an open beach. Moreover, there was a very big difference between Beryl and Fanny. Twenty-five years at least; and a great deal else besides.

"Why, Les! Don't tell me you're still suffused with girlish blushes. I can see I shall have to give you a little talk about bees and flowers. Come along. You're a big boy now, remember."

The jibe stung him into action. Slowly, reluctantly, he swam into the shallows, unable to force himself to his feet until his chest grounded on the shore. Then, like Venus rising from the foam, and with the same coy gesture, he minced across the sand towards his clothes, his eyes resolutely fixed on the cliff top, a deep puce blush mantling his cheeks.

But the climax of his ordeal was yet to come. Fanny sat up and patted her outspread towel.

"Here you are, honey. Bags of room for two. And

don't look so hot and bothered. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Very much to the contrary, in fact, so far as I can see."

As it turned out, his agony was mercifully brief. For once she had got him sitting beside her, Fanny seemed to forget his existence. She sat with her hands linked about her up-drawn knees, staring vaguely out to sea, her eyes narrowed against the spiral of smoke rising from the cigarette stuck in the corner of her mouth.

By adopting the same posture, and casing himself backwards to the rear edge of the towel, Leslie achieved a fairly harmless arrangement. Fanny, he was satisfied, could see no more of him than his feet and ankles, whilst he was confronted by nothing more serious than the back of her head and the curve of her spine.

Presently, he so far regained his confidence that he ventured to light a cigarette for himself. A couple of deep drags eased the tension of his muscles and stilled his twitching nerves. For the first time in fifteen minutes he dared fully to open his eyes.

It was surprising, he reflected, how quickly you could get used to a thing. Even to sunbathing in the buff with a gorgeous young woman who was almost a complete stranger. Had such a notion ever occurred to him before, he would have dismissed it as a fantastic dream. But now it was happening in actual fact, and already it seemed nothing so very extraordinary.

Again he felt a glow of self-satisfaction. He was not such a provincial hobbledchoy after all. During the last twenty-four hours he had been pitched into a set-up which, for hard-boiled sophistication, made the world of Beryl's society magazines look like a Sunday-school tea-party. And he had more than held his own. Without an instant's hesitation, the celebrated Guy Random, and his female counterpart, had accepted him

as one of themselves. A delicious tremor of nervous exhilaration agitated the pit of his stomach.

With her eyes still fixed on the horizon, Manny broke the silence. "I hear I missed some fun last night at El Cortijo. They tell me there was a first-class brawl of some sort. Did you see anything of it?"

Leslie nonchalantly flicked the ash off his cigarette. "I was in it—along with Guy."

"My word, you *are* a sizzling little rackapelt! Do tell me."

"Oh, it was nothing much. Just a spot of nonsense with one of the local girls: that saucy little piece called Consuela who works in the stationery shop. You probably saw her dancing with that tall old boy with the white hair."

"Yes, of course. What happened?"

"She got chased up the street by a couple of dozen men and dodged into the bar to escape. Then that bald-headed type who runs the place started to get tough with her, so naturally I clouted him one."

"Good show. How did you make out?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, it got a bit lively. He pulled a knife on me. Luckily, Guy spotted his game and sorted him out."

"Sounds like a most enjoyable party. And what happened to Consuela?"

"Oh, she bolted for it as soon as she got the chance."

"Sensible girl. Did you hear what she'd been doing to the boys?"

"No. But I can guess."

"I see. She must be pretty good at it."

"She is. But it seems it was the old chap's fault, really. He came dashing up when it was all over, in a proper panic. Said he'd given her a drop too much,

and raced up the road after her like a greyhound. Though I must say she looked sober enough to me."

Fanny pitched away the nub of her cigarette and yawned. "Who is the old gentleman, do you know? A bit of a character, by the looks of him."

"All I know is that he's English, and . . ."

"Indeed? English?"

"Yes. Lived out here for years, I understand. He has a cottage up there on the headland, behind the hôtel. I had a few words with him on the beach the other day."

Fanny nodded but made no further remark, continuing to stare out to sea. Apparently she had lost interest in the previous night's rumpus. Leslie was a little disappointed. It had been a pretty lively affair, in which he himself had played a leading part, and it would have been agreeable to enlarge upon it.

Meanwhile, in the course of conversation, he had quite recovered from his earlier dismay. So much so, indeed, that he unthinkingly relaxed from his guarded attitude and lay back, supporting himself on his elbows and revelling in the fierce bite of the sunlight on his skin.

As the silence prolonged itself, his eyes strayed to Fanny's back, and a sentimental, almost paternal mood, possessed him. There was something touchingly child-like in the way the damp chestnut curls clustered in the nape of her neck. There was a pathetic innocence in the dimpled curves of her shoulders. And as his gaze lingered, he felt a growing sense of self-reproach.

It was impossible to believe that this charming little creature was what Guy Random asserted: a ruthless secret agent in the service of a sinister organisation that would stick at nothing, including murder. The idea of such a thing was fantastic, was positively out-

rageous. And to think that he had accepted it without question ! A flush of genuine shame rose to his cheeks. The fact was, Guy had made a complete miscalculation, and he would tell him so at the first opportunity.

He suddenly realised that Fanny was speaking to him.

" Sorry. I didn't catch what you said."

" I said I haven't seen Guy Random around today."

" Er . . . no."

Leslie pulled quickly at his cigarette and coughed violently. This unexpected reference to Guy was disconcerting. He looked at her uncertainly out of the corner of his eye. Could it be, after all, that she really was . . . he thrust the thought from him. No, it was unthinkable. Absolutely unthinkable. All the same, he would have to be discreet, and avoid careless talk. He must say as little as possible, without appearing rude, and hope that she wouldn't press the matter.

His hopes were promptly disappointed. Fanny's tone was casual, but her question could not be ignored.

" Has he gone on the bus-trip to Barcelona ?"

" No."

" Tossa, perhaps ? Or Gerona ?"

" Er . . . no."

" He's not off-colour, is he ? I didn't see him in the restaurant at luncheon."

Leslie thrust his fingers into the sand. This was getting awkward. Should he put her off with some fabrication ? No. She might easily find out, and that would make him look a fool or worse. The safest thing was to tell her the truth. After all, Guy had admitted that his appointment with Myra had nothing to do with his investigations.

" No, he's all right. He's gone to have lunch with Mrs. Sheath. You know : the lady we met last night."

"I remember meeting Mrs. Sheath ; but I don't recall meeting a lady. Where's she staying ?"

"La Concha."

"She would be. Does Guy know her well ?"

"Couldn't say."

"But he has met her before ?"

"I believe so."

"Where ?"

"Couldn't say."

There was a pause. Leslie held his breath, praying devoutly that his stone-walling replies had brought the awkward quiz to a standstill. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was beginning to realise the ceaseless nervous strain endured by the secret agent. Even in ordinary social chit-chat you had to watch your every word.

Then it happened. Without the slightest warning, Fanny unclasped her hands from her knees, turned and leaned right over him, straddling him with her arms. He gave a shrill yelp and levered his torso upwards in an automatic attempt to regain his sitting position, only to fling himself backwards as if prodded by red-hot gimlets.

"Les . . ."

There was no reply.

"Les, ducky !"

Silence.

"LES ! What's the matter with you. . . . Oh, I see. They are a bit cumbersome, I'm afraid. There ! Is that any better ?"

Leslie lay flat on his back, still and rigid as a graven image. He was conscious of only two things : the frantic necessity of closing his eyes, and his utter inability to do so. Through the blood-surge in his ears he heard her clear soft voice.

"The trouble with you is, Les, that you're such a perfect little gentleman. I've spent the entire afternoon just begging you to make love to me, and all you do is make polite conversation. I'm most upset about it, and I just can't wait a moment longer. If you don't give me a lovely big kiss this very instant, I shall blow my crater with a deafening roar and erupt in all directions."

She bent her arms and started to sink down towards him, her enormous eyes shining through the black thickets of their lashes, her soft wet lips opening in the wound of love. Like a man pinned down by shell-fire on open ground, Leslie strove to dig himself through the towel and into the sand by sheer muscular contraction. Then, as they squeezed against his ribs, a hoarse cry burst from his throat.

"Stop! I'm a married man!"

Fanny halted her descent. "I beg your pardon?"

"My wife . . . Beryl . . . I'm a married man, I tell you!"

"Of course, my pet. I know. But never mind. C'est le premier pas qui coûte."

"Whaaat?"

"Just an old proverb, meaning once you've started it gets easier every time. Now, hold still a moment whilst I take a good deep breath."

Five minutes later the crack of a full-blooded slap split the silence of the cove like a pistol-shot. Leslie reeled backwards, at the same time smartly transferring his hand to his stinging right cheek. He stared with injured astonishment at Fanny who had raised herself on one elbow, her eyes narrowed, her lips set in a thin tight line.

"Oh, no, you don't, m'boy! Not by a long way."

"But I thought . . . I thought you said you wanted me to."

"Then you'd better think again."

"But you did," declared Leslie, the anger of frustrated passion over-riding his bewilderment. "You distinctly told me that you wanted me to make love to you."

"I said make love. Not transform yourself into a ravening monster. Do you realise that you're steaming—visibly—like a rude railway engine?"

"But you can't carry-on like this. It's not fair. It's not right!"

"What's not right?"

"To lead a chap on, and then pull him up short, just when . . . well . . . just when."

Fanny leaned back, supporting herself by her outstretched arms. Her forbidding scowl gave place to a patient man-to-man smile.

"Now, listen, Les. This is no time to get bogged down in moral arguments about right and wrong. According to what you tell me, you've spent thirty years in business. You're a practical man, and take it."

"Well, I reckon so."

"Then you ought to know by now that, in this life, you never get something for nothing."

Leslie shot back three feet. A look of genuine horror enveloped his sun-flushed features. "You mean you want . . ."

Fanny shook her head contemptuously. "All right. Calm yourself. I'm not asking for money. Though I've never been able to understand why a handful of bank-notes is social suicide, whilst an engagement ring is social success. After all, it's equal pay for equal work, these days."

"Then what *do* you want," muttered Leslie.

"Just a little information."

"Information? I don't know what you mean."

"Then I'll tell you. I want to know what Guy Random is doing in San Felipe."

"He's . . . he's on holiday, I suppose, like the rest of us."

"Now, don't be tiresome, Les. I know I'm a very pretty girl, but that doesn't mean I'm a fool. If Guy Random were on holiday, he wouldn't be staying at our hotel ; and much less so if he were on business. In either case he'd be billeted in that plushy bivouac up there on the cliffs, muck^{ing}-in with the sort of people who can afford to pay his scale of fees. No ; he's here on some under-cover job, and you're in it with him. *And I want to know what it is.*"

She dropped back flat on the towel, extended her limbs in X-formation and closed her eyes. "I'll give you three minutes to make your mind up. Your choice is simple : so far and no further, or so far and much further."

Leslie was appalled. He had been led into a trap. Guy was right after all. She *was* a spy. A spy so ruthless that, to get the information she wanted, she was prepared to buy it with her most intimate favours.

His immediate instinct was to leap into his clothes and get away. But that, he realised, would be failing in his task. It was clearly his duty to stand his ground and try to put her off the scent ; try to convince her that he had no connection with Guy. Otherwise she would be on her guard, and his job of shadowing her would become almost impossible.

He licked his lips and swallowed on a dry throat. It was an alarming prospect. From a lifetime's experience with Beryl, he knew only too well how difficult it was to hoodwink a keen-witted woman, even when one had plenty of time to invent a story. But now he had no

time at all; and his opponent was not only quick-witted, but also extremely beautiful—and bare.

He tried to get a grip on himself. He must think of some sort of story immediately. But what? His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. The cold sweat gathered in his armpits. His mind was a whirling chaos. It was too much, too much. With this giddy panorama sprawling beside him, how could a man be expected to think of anything—else.

“*Oh, dear me! I beg your pardon.*”

Leslie and Fanny jerked around to face Felix Vervain who was backing away from the edge of the hollow in which they were lying. He was smiling apologetically and making soothing gestures with his slim brown hands.

“So terribly sorry. I’d no idea the beach was . . . was in use. Do forgive me. I shan’t be a minute. I’ve just come down to look for an article of clothing which I think a friend of mine may have left here earlier this afternoon. Over there at the foot of the cliff very probably. Excuse me . . .”

He veered away and made for the fringe of the cove. Suddenly he bent down, turned around and retraced his steps. As he passed them, he bowed courteously and held up Guy’s garishly striped regimental tie.

“Found it. So very sorry to have made a nuisance of myself. Good afternoon to you. And lots of fun!”

Fanny watched him until he disappeared beyond the rocks. Then she stood up and reached for her frock.

“Well, that’s that. I shall have to be getting along.”

“What!”

“I’ve just remembered that I’ve got a letter I must write before the post goes out this evening. I’ll have to get back rightaway and attend to it.”

Without further delay she started to dress, and Leslie, utterly bewildered, followed her example. A couple of minutes' later he was scrambling along behind her as she led the way out of the cove at a spanking pace.

Throughout the twenty-minute walk back to the road, Fanny was silent and preoccupied, swinging along with her eyes fixed on the ground. Leslie, puffing and panting beside her, glanced repeatedly at her expressionless face. He was completely at a loss. Could it be that she was harmless, after all? For if she really were a spy, surely she wouldn't have broken off her operations at the critical moment just for the sake of catching the evening post. In spite of her drastic methods, it was still quite possible that her interest in Guy was simply feminine curiosity. He knew from bitter experience to what fantastic lengths an inquisitive woman would go . . .

It was all extremely puzzling. In the face of such contradictory behaviour there was only one thing he could do : wait and see.

A mile outside the town the road veered towards the sea, running parallel with the main bathing-beach which was approached by a short loop-track leading to the beach-café. Standing outside the building was a ramshackle bus which provided a half-hour shuttle service to and from the harbour.

Fanny spotted the vehicle, which was loading up with passengers, and increased the pace to a brisk trot. "Come on! We shall just catch it if we hurry."

When they were still two hundred yards away, the bus started to move ; whereupon Fanny stuck her fingers in her mouth and ripped off one of her car-splitting whistles, at the same time waving her arms windmill-fashion. The passengers on the rear seat

looked back and the bus stopped. The driver's torso emerged from the cab-window, accompanied by repeated blasts on the hooter.

"Pronto : Pronto ! No puedo quedar aquí todo el día."

"What does he say ?" parried Leslie.

Fanny accelerated to a dead run. "He says 'get a bloody move on, I can't wait here all day.'"

As they scrambled aboard through the side-door, the young man at the wheel brandished a pack of tickets and grinned wolfishly. "Dos pesetas, por favor."

Digging in his pocket for the money, Leslie looked at him with distaste. There was a cool arrogance about the sharp mahogany-tanned features topped by a shaggy mane of black hair. And under his genial manner there was more than a hint of boulderish self-assurance. Moreover, he was showing much more interest in Fanny than in giving the tickets and the change. Indeed, he had screwed right round in his seat and was blatantly going over her points as she stood in the gangway between the overcrowded benches.

"Bonita !" he exclaimed, giving Leslie a lewd wink. He described abundant curves with his free hand and loudly smacked his lips. "Qué pechos magníficos ! Qué muslos sublimes !"

In due course he handed over the tickets, lapped himself around the steering-wheel, let in the clutch with a bang and drove out onto the road like one possessed.

As they rocketed down the long hill into the town, Leslie vented his irritation, in so far as the frantic bouncing and lurching of the bus would permit.

"Impudent young cuss. Got a proper cheeky way with him. What was he going on about ?"

Fanny, clinging to the nearest seat for support, smiled with smug self-satisfaction. "As a matter of fact, he was being rather polite. He passed some uncommonly obliging remarks about my figure."

Further conversation was impossible, for as they entered the built-up area, the driver placed his elbow firmly on the horn-button and kept it there, at the same time meditatively cupping his chin in his upraised palm.

When they neared the bottle-neck by the cork-factory Leslie closed his eyes and automatically braced his muscles. With this maniac at the wheel, anything might happen. . . . And, five seconds later, something very nearly did. *

There was a sickening scream of locked tyres and a frightful swerve as the bus all but collided with an oncoming motor-cycle. The passengers rose from their seats with squawks of alarm, but the young man at the wheel was wholly unperturbed. Wrenching the bus up onto the sidewalk, he leaned out from his window and addressed the infuriated motor-cyclist with icy calm.

"And where the bloody hell do you think *you're* going, you inspissated clot!"

"Disgusting!" muttered Leslie as the bus got under way again. "It beats me how these foreigners always pick up the swear-words. The way he tore that lot off, you'd think he was English."

Fanny nodded. "You would indeed. And very highly educated, too."

10

GUY had no appetite for dinner. Sitting at his corner table, facing the door, he gulped down glass after glass of strong red wine, but could scarcely manage to force back a single mouthful of the massive courses set before him. He was a badly worried man.

After leaving Felix Vervain, he had spent several hours making cautious enquiries about Henry Salt. He had questioned the fishermen lounging around the harbour; he had sounded the chemist, the barber and a variety of shopkeepers; he had chatted with a score of assorted types in the bars and cafés. And he had drawn a complete blank. No one in San Felipe, it seemed, had ever heard of an Englishman called Henry Salt; nor had anyone heard of a body being found in the bay with a terrific knife-wound in the back. At any rate, no one was prepared to talk.

This deadlock so early in his investigations was bad enough, but he had a far worse worry than that. Leslie was missing. He had failed to keep the pre-arranged rendezvous on the hotel terrace before dinner; and now, with the meal nearly over, Beryl was still sitting alone, champing her food in moody silence except for an occasional remark to the adjacent Glossops.

Equally alarming was the absence of Fanny Traverse. Her place, too, was unoccupied; and, as the minutes sped by, the pair of empty chairs took on a sinister, a

terrifying significance. Could it be that Leslie had run into serious trouble already? Had he been lured into a trap and . . . Guy's hand trembled so violently that his wine slopped onto the tablecloth. He had a sudden horrifying vision of a .38 automatic—and the sort of hole it made.

He tried to suppress his rising panic. Nervous strain of this sort was the daily lot of the secret agent, and he must force himself to endure it calmly. He would have to think out a plan of action. And he would have to cancel his appointment with Felix Vervain. This was no time for fooling around with the crazy experiments of crack-pot eccentrics.

The waiter brought the dessert, and laid a slip of paper beside Guy's plate. "For you, sir. It was found in the patio."

Carefully concealing his anxiety, Guy lit a cigar, took a swig at his wine and smoothed out the crumpled note under cover of his napkin.

"Beryl has locked me in the bedroom and taken away my trousers. Please try to get me out, I have something to report. She'll be at the dance tonight with the Glossops."

Guy sighed with relief and rubbed the sweat off his palms. Leslie was in a trap all right, but a safe, if tedious one. Nevertheless, prompt action was called for.

He got up and drifted casually out of the restaurant, aware of Beryl's obnoxious stare pinned to his shoulder-blades. In the hall he beckoned the porter, slipped a fifty-peseta bill into his hand and asked for the key to Leslie's room. The man returned from the bureau regretfully shaking his head. The key had not been handed in.

Obviously, Beryl wasn't taking any risks. No doubt

she'd got the key in her handbag. Well, there was only one thing to do : try to get hold of it during the night's festivities. And, for an operation like that, the assistance of Felix Vervain might well prove very useful.

At eleven o'clock precisely Guy presented himself at El Cortijo. Felix was already there, sitting at an outside table under the awning. His manner was even more suave and genial than usual, and his bright blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Good evening, my dear fellow. All ready for our little test? I trust your Mrs. Spindle is available."

Guy nodded and called for drinks. "Oh, yes. Very much so. There's a dance in the hotel tonight, and she's going to grace it with her presence I understand."

"Capital, capital! Just the right set-up for a really convincing demonstration. You mark my words, Random. A couple of drops of the old T.O.V. and . . . well, deeds speak louder than words. When the time comes, you'll see."

He rummaged in his jacket pocket and produced Guy's regimental tie. "Here's your cravat. I found it down in the cove when I went for my swim. I also found two of your friends there, by the way. Mr. Spindle and that delicious little chestnut filly you were frisking with last night."

Guy looked up sharply. "Oh? What were they doing?"

Felix raised a discreet eyebrow. "Well, in my young days we called it nature-study. And, whilst we're on the subject of Mr. Spindle, I do feel that we ought to get him out of the way whilst we're sacrificing his wife in the interests of science. Otherwise he may have rather a harrowing time when the fun begins."

"He is out of the way. I've just heard that Beryl has locked him up in the bedroom to keep him out of

mischievous. And when you've finished your experiments on the lady, I shall require your assistance to get the key off her, so that I can release the poor fellow."

"Certainly. I shall be delighted. That is if there's anything of Mrs. Spindle left to get the key off."

Sipping his drink, Guy looked gloomily at the dark, still waters of the bay beyond the harbour wall. He was no longer amused by Felix Vervain's fantastic obsession. Instead, he felt a keen sense of guilt and self-reproach. After more than twenty-four hours in San Felipe he had made no progress whatsoever in his mission; and now, when he ought to be hard at work, he was wasting his time in frivolous practical-jokes. Then a sudden thought struck him.

"By the way, Mr. Vervain. Have you, by any chance, heard of a young Englishman round these parts, called Henry Salt?"

There was a pause; a pause just long enough to flick Guy's nervous alarm-system. He looked quickly out of the corner of his eye as Felix answered.

"Salt, you say? Henry Salt? No, I don't recall the name."

His voice was perfectly casual, his expression calm and indifferent. But Guy saw that the fingers holding the cigar were tightly clamped, and that the ash had fallen onto the table.

Felix finished his drink and rose to his feet. "Well, Mr. Random, if you're ready, I suggest we get to work. Always provided you're still interested?"

Guy nodded vigorously. "By all means. I'm ready when you are. The sooner the better. Let's go!"

That tumbled blob of cigar-ash had altered the whole picture. At last, he suspected, he had found a crack in the wall of mystery surrounding Henry Salt. Unless he was much mistaken, Felix Vervain knew

something, and contact must be maintained at all costs. From now on, he would have to cling to the old gentleman like a leech and humour his every whim, however crazy.

They started to walk along the waterfront towards the hotel. Presently Felix stopped at the entrance to one of the side-streets and consulted his watch.

"It's not midnight yet. We've got plenty of time. If you don't mind, I'll just drop in on Consuela for a minute. I want her to come up to the cottage tomorrow and do some mending for me."

When they reached the stationery shop, Felix led the way past the shuttered façade and down an adjacent alley. "We'll have to go round to the living-quarters at the back. I expect she'll be having her supper."

He opened an iron gate in a blank wall and they stepped into a small square yard littered with empty packing-cases and assorted rubbish. After well-nigh strangling themselves on a clothes-line suspended across the yard at neck height, they approached the back door of the premises, to the left of which was a lighted window with the blinds drawn.

As Felix raised his hand to knock, there was a sudden frightful uproar from within. A man's voice broke into a torrent of abusive threats, punctuated by shrill female screams. There was a scurry of agitated footsteps, followed by the crash of overturned furniture, the clatter of breaking pottery and a prolonged yell of anguish. Then silence.

"Domestic bliss," said Felix with a rueful smile. "Believe me, Random, we bachelors don't know how lucky we are. However, an armistice seems to have been declared for the moment."

He thumped lustily. After a considerable pause the

door was wrenched open to reveal the figure of a young man silhouetted against the bright light within.

He was an alarming sight. Blood was streaming down his swarthy scowling face from a cut on his right temple. The front of his shirt was soaked with steaming gravy, and a mess of vegetable matter was embedded in his shaggy black hair.

"Qué hay . . ." he began, raising his arm to make a threatening gesture with a torn-off chair leg. Then he caught sight of Félix. "Ah, Mecstair Vairvine ! Dispense usted, señor. Cómo va ?"

He turned back into the room, and a moment later Consuela appeared, clutching her ripped bodice to her heaving bosom, her hair tumbling about her shoulders, her eyes flaming with the fires of victory.

No little shaken, Guy retreated several paces whilst Felix leaned against the floor-post and launched off into fluent Catalan. The conversation developed at some length, and presently, with a word of excuse, Felix followed the girl inside.

Guy lit a cigarette and propped himself against the house wall. Suddenly he froze, his eyes riveted on a stack of old boxes by the gate. The rising moon was just beginning to thin the inky darkness, and in the shadowy half-light he had sensed, rather than seen, a slight movement. . . .

This was the sort of situation he really knew how to handle. He drew deeply on his cigarette and deliberately looked away to freshen his vision. Then he shot a quick oblique glance at the pile of boxes. This time he saw it fairly : the outline of an arm ending in the pale blur of the hand . . . and a gleam of metal.

The skin on the back of his neck tautened and tingled. Unless he was much mistaken, Fanny Traverse was behind those boxes, less than a dozen paces from

him, and complete with artillery. A hand touched his elbow.

"Ready now, my dear fellow. Sorry to keep you waiting. Shall we press on?"

Guy was faced with a split-second choice. Should he hang on to Felix? Or should he get rid of him and try to find out what Fanny was up to in Consuela's backyard? He made a lightning calculation and decided on the former alternative. At this stage, a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

He followed Felix across the yard and let him pass first through the gate into the alley. Then he smiled grimly, stepped a pace to one side and thrust his shoulder against the piled-up boxes. As he slammed the gate behind him, he heard through the clatter of falling timber, an unmistakable squawk of anguish.

"I must apologise," said Felix as they reached the street, "for involving you in a domestic brawl, but Consuela is a very high-spirited girl. It's extremely dangerous to cross her, as I learned to my cost when I reproved her for washing the floor with my silk pyjamas."

"What happened?"

"She baptised me with the contents of her bucket, and told me to go and get stuffed."

"A tough-looking customer, her husband. I hadn't realised she was married."

"She isn't. That's just the current boy-friend. She's a sociable little thing, and likes to have a man about the house."

"So it seems. If only for target practice."

"Well, she's apt to be a bit jealous, you know, like all these Spaniards; and she suspects him of flirting with the lady passengers. He drives that dilapidated bus that takes the tourists to the bathing beach."

When they reached the corner opposite the hotel, Felix halted and placed his hand on Guy's shoulder. "Well, Random, here we are. The moment has arrived to put *The Tears of Venus* to the proof. Produce your *Mrs. Spindle*, and leave the rest to me."

He cocked his head as a wave of dance-music surged across the road from the brightly lighted windows. "Aha ! I hear the sounds of revelry by night. Lead on, dear lad. We shall very soon hear the sound of something else."

The proprietor of the Hotel de la Playa was an enterprising man. His clientele included a fair number of French, plus a sprinkling of Germans, Netherlanders and Scandinavians ; but the vast majority of his customers were middle-aged, middle-class English. Their satisfaction was his main concern, and a diligent study of their habits had revealed the secret of achieving it. This was, to provide them when abroad with the closest possible imitation of their life at home.

Tonight he had excelled himself ; a fact which was not lost upon Guy when he and Felix entered the main restaurant, converted for the occasion into a gaily decorated ballroom.

"And very nice too. Snug and cosy to a degree. I am keenly reminded of the annual frolic of *The Chamber of Trade* at a provincial town-hall. The only thing that's missing is His Worship the Mayor clanking around in his fancy necklace."

The big oblong room was decked with brightly coloured paper-chains. Clusters of chairs and tables lined the perimeter, and a six-piece band occupied an improvised platform at the end opposite the doors. The din was deafening and the atmosphere suffocating,

for the clients of the Playa had been reinforced by several score visitors from the other hotels in the town.

Guy got hold of a waiter, and they were soon installed at a table for two in the front row near the entrance.

It was now nearly one o'clock, and the spirit of jollity reigned supreme : the self-consciously frisky jollity of the middle-class Briton on the spree in foreign parts. The continental amenity of unlimited cheap alcohol was, as usual, being conscientiously abused, and most of the company were already slightly tipsy. The men's faces were flushed and sweating, and there was much braying laughter as they jostled around the floor with the ludicrous swagger of domesticated hubby playing wolf-on-the-prowl. The ladies were in equally rompish mood. Glassy eyed and considerably dishevelled, they were permitting, even encouraging, familiarities which at home they would have rewarded with an outraged slap.

Soon the merriment soared to still giddier heights, when the waiters released quantities of coloured balloons and distributed paper streamers rolled up into tight balls. These latter injected a double dose of hilarity into the proceedings, for, when flung into the air, their action was unpredictable. Some unfurled in the approved style, twining about the bodies of the dancers. But others remained wound up, in the semblance of paper golf-balls. The majority of these missiles speedily found their way into the bosoms of the ladies' dresses, whence they were retrieved with volleys of coarse guffaws and squeals of girlish delight.

Guy sipped his wine with an expression of profound gloom. "I fear that I lack the convivial spirit," he declared morosely. "This type of celebration never

fails to fill me with alarm and despondency) increasing, as the hours crawl by, to acute persecution mania, culminating in a terrible urge to self-destruction. All we need now is a bunch of beer-sodden Rugger hearties making a mock scrummage, or a bandy-legged fox-chaser blowing his guts out on a hunting-horn."

"Come, come," replied Felix soothingly. "You must remember that this is the age of the Common Man, and allow him his common amusements. We can't all divert ourselves by lunching with great big hungry girls in super-luxury hotels. More's the pity."

He surveyed the heaving mass on the dance-floor with benign detachment. "For my own part, I find it a most agreeable little orgy; and an admirable setting for our experiment. I can hardly wait to see my victim."

"I haven't spotted her yet," replied Guy. "But in this whirl of dissipation one might well fail to notice Boadicea in a Bikini. We'll have to wait until the frenzy subsides."

A moment later the music stopped and there was a general scamper from the floor to the bottle-laden tables. Guy raised himself in his seat and methodically scrutinised the room. It did not take him long to locate Mrs. Spindle, sitting with the Glossops at the edge of the floor near the band-platform.

She was in full fig, wearing a strapless evening gown of a particularly cruel shade of harsh metallic green. A wealth of jewellery festooned her person: diamond ear-pendants, a double rope of pearls and a variety of costly rings. An ornate handbag lay in her lap and she was smoking a cigarette with finicking gentility. Her habitual flinty glare was now replaced by a smile that was at once simpering and patronising. Indeed,

she was n^ot so much watching the proceedings as presiding over them, as she often presided over similar occasions at home in Yewbury. For the first time since her arrival in San Felipe she was really enjoying herself.

Felix nodded his head approvingly. "I see your point, Random. Not that she is an ugly woman. In fact there is a certain baroque opulence about her structure which, I apprehend, might not come amiss to those who like a lot of everything without being too particular where everything is. But her expression is uncommonly forbidding, not to say refrigerating. To me, at any rate, she is strongly reminiscent of a Roman matron smelling a bad drain."

"Too true. By the time she'd finished with me this morning I felt like Dan the Sanitary Man."

"Then I can take it you're quite satisfied? You are perfectly liberty to choose another lady if you wish. I make no conditions whatsoever."

Guy shook his head emphatically. "No, thank you, Mr. Vervain. As I said this afternoon, if The Tears of Venus works with Beryl Spindle, then so far as I'm concerned you've proved your case."

"Very well. There is no point in further delay. We will get to work. But first we must take the necessary precautions."

"Precautions? What do you mean?"

Felix drew a matchbox from his pocket. It contained a number of pellets of cotton-wool. "Take a couple of these and wedge them firmly in your nostrils. You won't find them unpleasant. The chemical aroma is just a touch of chlorophyll deodorant which I have added as an extra safeguard."

"But what on earth is the idea?"

"Come, my boy. Surely you haven't forgotten your

Homer. You remember the episode of Odysseus and the Sirens : how he made his crew bung up their ears with wax so that they shouldn't be lured to their doom by the Sirens' irresistible music. Well, this is the same principle. We must bung up our noses with cotton-wool, so that we are immune to the irresistible scent of The Tears of Venus."

"Well, really!"

"I assure you it's absolutely necessary. T.O.V. is no respecter of persons. You and I are just as susceptible to its magic as any other man in this room. Come, now, stuff 'em in. And see that you push them well home. I don't want any accidents."

He selected two of the pellets and pushed them carefully into his nostrils, tamping them back with the tip of his little finger. "Good. That's that. All set?"

Guy gave a half-sheepish, half-exasperated grin. "Really, Mr. Vervain, this is carrying a joke too far. I mean to say . . ."

For the first time Felix's good humour deserted him. The whimsical smile vanished from his eyes, and he spoke with a cold indifference.

"Very well, Mr. Random. If that's your attitude, the experiment is off."

"But surely . . ."

"I say the experiment is off, unless you agree to take the precautions I prescribe. As soon as this scent is released, all hell will break loose in this ballroom. And if you get a sniff, you'll be right in there in the middle of the massacre. You'd be lucky to escape without serious injury."

"I'm prepared to take the risk."

"Possible so. But I'm not prepared to take the responsibility."

He stood up and pushed back his chair. "I thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Random, but I will not trespass upon it further. I am sorry that you cannot accept my word in this matter. However, I suppose it is rather too much to expect."

Guy seized him by the arm, pressing him back into his seat. He saw that he had seriously upset the old gentleman and, unless he put matters right immediately, he would be in danger of losing contact with the only person in San Felipe who could give him a lead on Henry Salt.

"I apologise, Mr. Vervain. Believe me, I am most anxious for the test to proceed. It's just that I'm always a bit chary of putting anything up my nose since the unfortunate occasion when, at the age of three, I rammed a coloured glass bead up my right nostril. It took my nanny and the stable-boy two hours to dislodge it, working in relays with a rusty crochet-hook. None the less, in the interests of science, I will do my best to overcome my natural aversion."

He took a couple of pellets and inserted them, closely watched by Felix who had immediately recovered from his fit of pique.

"There, now. I'm completely smell-proof. And I'm ready when you are."

Felix reached into his breast-pocket and drew out the carefully stoppered bottle which he had shown to Guy in the afternoon. He cupped it delicately in his joined palms and smiled with satisfaction.

"There it is, Random. The real thing. An ounce of the original Tears of Venus, *plus* the Vervain fixative. Mrs. Spindle is a highly privileged woman if she only knew it, for she's getting a far superior article to that produced for Messalina herself."

He started to unwind the wire thread securing the

stopper to the neck of the bottle. "And don't jog my elbow. If we lose this we've had it."

Guy stared down at the pale amber liquid in the thick glass container. "Do you mean that's your entire stock of the stuff?"

"Of the perfected brew, yes. I've got plenty of the scent back in the laboratory, but no more of the fixative. It's extremely slow and costly to produce. It took me a fortnight to make the tiny quantity required to fix this single ounce."

He crouched forward, his eyes shining with excitement. "And now for our plan of campaign. I'm most anxious that you should get a good clear view of the operation, so that there's no argument about the result, and no suspicion of any phoney business. I suggest, therefore, that we hold our fire until the floor is cleared and everyone is seated. I will then make my way towards the band-platform at the far end there, and exchange a few words with the musicians, at the same time extracting the stopper from the bottle. This done, I shall saunter on, passing behind the table where Mrs. Spindle and her friends are sitting. As I do so, I shall apply two drops—no more—to the bare skin of her right shoulder. All right?"

"Sounds fair enough to me. Do you want any help?"

"No, no. Far from it. All I want you to do is stay here, just where you are, and *watch*." It's an excellent observation point. You will have an uninterrupted view up the length of the floor: close enough to see exactly what happens, but distant enough to allow you to take in the whole panorama. Agreed?"

Guy folded his arms on his chest and nodded solemnly. "I will do exactly as you suggest, Mr. Vervain. I shall observe everything with the closest

attention, and base my conclusions fairly and squarely upon the evidence laid before me."

The band stopped playing and the musicians put aside their instruments. The couples thronging the floor disentangled themselves and began to drift off the parquet to the surrounding tables. Felix stood up, concealing the bottle in his right hand.

"Well, here we go. And keep your eyes peeled. The events of the next few minutes will be well worth a second glance."

As the last of the dancers resumed their seats, he strolled casually up the room to the band-platform. Arrived there, he laid a hand on the shoulder of the guitarist who turned to greet him like an old friend. An animated conversation developed, and Guy took the opportunity to pin-point Beryl Spindle.

He had a clear view of her as she sat facing him at the far end of the room, enthroned between the Glossops. Sipping a liqueur, with her little finger daintily crooked, she was surveying the company with an air of amiable hauteur. As he watched her, she looked in his direction and spotted him for the first time. Her expression was instantly transformed. The amiability vanished, the hauteur intensified to acute revulsion. Guy, on the receiving end, felt himself abruptly demoted from a bad drain to an open sewer.

He was busily arranging his features in a sneer of icy disdain when he saw Felix turn away from the band-platform and drift slowly onwards between the tables. His right arm was now crooked at the elbow, the hand resting against his waist.

Guy watched with mounting excitement. Another four paces and Felix would be on the target. One . . . two . . . three . . . His hand came up in a quick smooth movement and hovered over the full-blown

curve of Beryl's exposed shoulder. Simultaneously, without the slightest warning, Cuthbert Glossop swung around to beckon a waiter. His outflung arm struck Felix on the wrist, whereupon the open bottle shot up into the air and plunged mouth foremost into the yawning chasm of Beryl Spindle's bust.

The reactions to this mishap were three in number, of which the first two were instantaneous, coincidental and only to be expected. Beryl gripped the seat of her chair with both hands, opened her mouth to the fullest extent and released a long agonised "Ayceee," like a flamenco singer warming up for the night's work. At the same time, Cuthbert Glossop leapt to his feet and made a vicious grab at Felix's arm.

The third reaction, however, was wholly unexpected. Cuthbert's furious gesture was halted as if a thunderbolt had struck him in the solar plexus. Then his head began to revolve upon his shoulders with the relentless questing motion of a traversing tank-turret, his nose sweeping and searching like the gun laying onto its target. Suddenly, with the bestial ferocity of a besotted ape-man, he flung himself at Beryl, wrenched her out of her chair, looped her backwards over his right arm and cut off her yell of terror with a searing kiss on the mouth.

But his tenancy was short-lived. He had scarcely clamped his lips to hers when a barrage of glassware and woodwork exploded in all directions as a dozen berserk males from the adjoining tables piled in on top of him like chunks of soft iron slamming onto an electro-magnet. Within five seconds, Beryl Spindle was completely lost to view in a whirling mass of threshing limbs; a mass which increased in bulk and vivacity every instant as the men at the more distant tables soared from their chairs and hurled themselves into the seething vortex.

Guy, locked in a rigor of stupefaction, was knocked sprawling on all-fours as his neighbours near the doorway joined in the stampede. Stumbling feet ground into his back, kicked him in the ribs and trampled on his fingers as he lay on his stomach, sheltering his head with his arms like a scrum-half under a forward charge.

When he dragged himself to his knees, he saw that every one of the hundred men in the ballroom, including the musicians, was now involved in the terrible fracas raging below the band-platform. The din was appalling. The infuriated yells and blistering oaths of the combatants were reinforced by the hysterical screams of their women-folk ; and the whole delirious symphony was accompanied by a sinister ground-bass of rending cloth, pounding flesh and splintering bone.

Cowering against the doorpost, he stared aghast at the boiling cauldron of sub-human passions, from which, at irregular intervals, bloodstained bodies, their clothing ripped to shreds, were expelled with the haphazard violence of hiccoughs from a bilious stomach.

A ringing shout galvanised him out of his paralysis. "Stand-by, Random ! I'm going in to get her."

Felix was poised on the edge of the platform, grasping a jagged table-leg. His face was set, his jaw jutting as he hovered over the conflict seeking a point of entry. The next moment he had plunged down into the very navel of the maelstrom, his weapon scything right and left in long reaping arcs.

It seemed for several seconds that his sortie was in vain. But just when Guy was giving him up for lost, a rift split open in the wall of bodies facing him, and out of it rocketed Beryl Spindle, racing towards him down the open floor in a diamond bracelet and half a stocking.

Again Felix's voice rang out above the tumult. "Hold 'em at the door, Random! Hold 'em at the door!"

As Beryl flashed past him into the hall, Guy snatched up a chair and flung himself into the breach, full athwart the path of the howling mob streaming down the ballroom in pursuit.

Felling the leader, Cuthbert Glossop, with a snorter on the side of the head, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Beryl sprinting madly up the staircase. Then the whole lot were on top of him.

He made a gallant attempt to fight off the first wave, knowing only that he must give Beryl time to reach the sanctuary of her room. He dropped two of them in their tracks with a sizzling forehand and backhand, but the next moment they were all over him and he was swept backwards into the hall by sheer weight of numbers.

He stumbled and nearly went down under the charge, but heaved himself to his feet and leapt for the stairway. Jabbing, hacking, slashing, he fought a bitter delaying action up to the first landing. But there disaster overtook him. Four of them launched themselves at him in a sudden concerted rush, the chair was wrenched from his hands and he was left defenceless. There was only one thing for it: pull out before he was annihilated and stake all on a last stand on the top floor.

He spun round and galloped up the stairs like a panic-stricken antelope. Breasting the fourth and final flight, he saw Beryl ahead of him in the corridor, pounding at the bedroom door, and heard her frenzied cries.

"Let me in, Leslie! Let me in!"

Then everything happened at once. His forward foot caught the lip of the top step, and he crashed down

flat on his face. Whereupon, with a resounding pop, the cotton-wool pellet shot out of his right nostril just as Leslie flung open the door for Beryl to dart inside.

With the yelling pack almost on top of him, Guy rose off the carpet and streaked down the corridor like an aircraft ejected from a steam-catapult. In a single maniacal convulsion he plucked Leslie off the threshold and tossed him over his shoulder into the very core of the demented rabble. Then, with a piercing whinny of unbridled lust, he bounded into the bedroom and slammed the door.

11

LESLIE perched himself on the edge of Guy's bed and stilled his delirious gabble with a soothing pat on the shoulder.

"Now, take it easy, old boy. There's nothing to worry about, not a thing. I don't want your apologies and excuses. There's no call for it."

Guy, cringing in the mattress with his face turned to the wall, levered himself up on one elbow and gaped incredulously.

"You mean you don't mind?"

"Mind! I'm damn grateful to you. She's a changed woman, that's what she is. You wouldn't recognise her. All smiles, and as sweet as sugar. It's a miracle."

"You mean *she* didn't mind either?"

"That's what I keep on trying to tell you. Believe

me, she's, like a cat with two tails. Properly made-up with herself. I only hope it lasts. I've never seen her like this before ; not even on our honeymoon."

Leslie got up and dropped into an armchair. "There's just one thing I'd like to know."

"Er . . . yes ?"

"I'd like to know what made you and all those other chaps suddenly go after her. I know she's my wife and all that, but she isn't exactly a flaming beauty. And she's not what you'd call a come-hither sort either."

"For Heaven's sake, man ! Don't you understand ? It was that scent of Felix Vervain's."

"Scent ? What scent ?"

"The Tears of Venus."

"Eh ?"

"You mean you didn't *smell* anything ? Not even when we . . . when she rushed into your bedroom ?"

Leslie shook his head with a hint of reproach. "The way you slung me down that corridor, I didn't have time to do any smelling or anything else."

Guy reared himself up against the pillows and reached for his pipe. "I can see that it's high time I explained matters. And you'd better listen carefully, because there's a great deal more in this than meets the nose."

Ten minutes later, Leslie sat back and slapped his knee. "Well, I never ! Who'd have believed it ? The wicked old devil. My word, I wouldn't mind getting hold of a bottle of the stuff myself. I could have some rare good fun with a drop or two of that back in Yewbury."

Guy stared at him aghast. "Fun ? You calmly sit there and talk about *fun* ! Don't you realise what this stuff is ?"

Leslie looked up in astonishment. "What's biting you? It's a bit of a rum do, and no mistake. But I don't see there's anything to get all worked up about."

"God on a toboggan!" cried Guy, thumping the bedside table. "Can't you grasp the fact that this is IT?"

"What?"

"The secret we're looking for; the thing that Henry Salt was after and that cost him his life; the thing *they're* after."

"Come off it," scoffed Leslie. "Just because a frisky old boy cooks up a naughty perfume . . ."

He broke off as Guy threw back the covers and sprang out of bed. "Listen to me, Les, and try to get this thing straight. The Tears of Venus is very much more than a scent. It's a secret weapon of the most appalling significance; as deadly in its own subtle way as the H-bomb. The nation that possesses it can dominate the world."

He held up his hand as Leslie sought to interrupt. "No, I'm not exaggerating in the least. Just think for a moment. There are more ways of bringing a country to its knees than by blasting its cities off the face of the earth with thermo-nuclear explosions. And more profitable ways, too; because a radio-active desert isn't much use to anybody. A much tidier and cheaper way of defeating a nation is to paralyse its internal life."

"Yes, I know, but . . ."

"How could it be done? Very easily. Cast your mind back to what happened last night. Then try to imagine the same sort of thing taking place in a crowded underground station at rush hour; in a big factory or office-block; at the Cup Final at Wembley Stadium."

"Strewth!"

"Exactly. But we needn't go to such lengths as

that. Results just as deadly could be achieved working on a much smaller scale. If I were directing the use of this weapon, I should employ it against the handful of people who really count : Cabinet Ministers, Service Chiefs, scientists, television panel-stars. A few drops of the scent sprinkled around on the right occasions amongst that lot would lead to the collapse of government, mutiny in the armed forces, the total disorganisation of scientific research and the instant fusing of every television set in the country. A mere half-dozen agents would be sufficient to spread complete chaos throughout the entire life of the nation."

Guy paused to draw breath and relight his pipe. "Nor, of course, must we forget the Mother of Parliaments herself. I should certainly detail one agent to attend a critical debate in the House of Commons and, from the Strangers' Gallery, direct his spray-gun at one or other of the lady members. A tricky operation, no doubt ; but one of them, at any rate, he couldn't miss. The results I leave to your imagination. Mine boggles."

Leslie's face was blanched and his hands trembling as he dragged at his cigarette. "My God, Guy, I never thought of it like that. What are we going to do about it ?"

Guy reached for his trousers. "We're going to get hold of Felix Vervain straightaway and bring him to his senses. At the moment he clearly has no realisation at all of the terrible thing he has invented. He just regards it as an interesting hobby. I shall have to try to convince him of the appalling potentialities of The Tears of Venus, should the secret fall into the hands of a foreign power, and make him see the absolute necessity of handing the whole thing over to the proper authorities."

"And if he won't agree?"

"Then I shall be obliged to employ more forceful methods. This is no time for half-measures, Les. We're playing a game of life-and-death against opponents who will stick at nothing, as poor Henry Sal discovered to his cost. And the stake is the survival of Western Democracy."

He pulled on his jacket. "All set? There's not a moment to lose."

"You mean you're going up there rightaway? Before you've had anything to eat?"

"Hell, man, this is urgent. We can't hang about waiting for breakfast."

"Breakfast? What are you talking about? You mean dinner."

"What?"

"Dinner. It's turned eight o'clock."

Guy reeled against the handbasin and pointed feebly at the muslin curtained windows. "Are you crazy, or am I? Look, it's hardly light yet."

"You mean it's hardly dark. That's dusk out there, not dawn."

"Then . . . then I've been asleep all day."

"Sure you have," replied Leslie cheerfully. "Since seven o'clock this morning, anyway, when me and the hall porter found you lying in the corridor out there, unconscious."

"But I can't believe it. It's impossible."

Leslie shook his head and sighed. "Beryl is a very thorough woman."

Ten minutes later Guy stormed out of the telephone box in the hall. "It's infuriating! Just when we need one, there's not a taxi to be had in the entire town. There's nothing for it, Les. We shall have to walk."

Leslie, whose feet were still sore from his previous

afternoon's ramble round the headland, showed little or no enthusiasm.

"Steady on. There's not all that hurry. The half-day trippers will be coming in soon for dinner. We'll get a cab then."

Guy seized him by the arm and dragged him into the street. "God on an eight-foot self-propelled combine-harvester with bagging attached! Can't you understand that every second counts? If *we* don't get hold of The Tears of Venus, the chances are that Fanny Traverse will. And then it won't be a two-mile walk along the Costa Brava. It'll be a lifetime's route-march round the Siberian salt mines."

He set off towards the waterfront with long swinging strides that compelled Leslie to break into a shambling trot. As they approached the harbour, the ramshackle beach-bus clattered up to its halting point and disgorged its last belated load of passengers. Then, with a salvo of harrowing explosions, it started to move off towards the centre of the town.

"He might take us if we pay him enough," panted Leslie. "Looks as if he's finished for the day."

Guy let out a desperate whoop and waved his arms above his head. The bus shuddered to a standstill and the saturnine face of Consuela's boy-friend emerged from the cab window.

"Qué hay?"

There was a short sharp parley which completely emptied Guy's wallet, and, a moment later, they were roaring past the cork-factory and up the long ascent to the headland.

"You'd better enjoy this ride," said Guy grimly, "because it's a very expensive one. Two hundred pesetas to be precise." He nodded towards the piratical figure hunched over the wheel. "Consuela will be well

advised to keep her hooks in that young man. He's going a long, long way."

Guy stopped the bus at the top of the hill and got out, returning the driver's sarcastic "Hasta luego" with a sour glower. Then, followed by Leslie, he swung off the road on to the sandy track leading to Felix's cottage.

"Two hundred pesetas," he muttered savagely. "Sheer brass-faced extortion. If I make anything on my expenses-account on this mission I shall be damn lucky."

"Did you tell him to wait?" asked Leslie.

"Not likely. I don't want to buy his bloody bus."

"Well, it sounds as if he is waiting." I don't hear the engine."

"Don't worry about *him*," snarled Guy. "No doubt he's free-wheeling back to town to save the petrol for his cigarette lighter."

They padded along through the hot soft darkness scented with sun-baked pine resin. Away below to the right twinkled the lights of San Felipe, clustering round the harbour. To the left there was nothing but the vague blackness of the open sea. A mile in front, on the extreme point of the headland, a faint amber glow hovered over La Conca hotel, hidden from view by the intervening crest.

"I only hope," said Guy, "that the old gentleman is in co-operative mood. You can never be sure with these intellectual hermit types. They're not properly in touch with reality, and often entertain curious notions about scientific truth transcending all national boundaries, and so forth. However, I flatter myself I can talk most people into pretty nearly anything when I try. After all, it's my job."

"How much farther is it?" demanded Leslie.

"I've got a blister like a football coming up on my heel."

"You must try to disregard such trifles, and encourage yourself with the thought that you're doing this for England. We're nearly there now . . . I say, that's odd."

He stopped and pointed towards a black blur two hundred yards away under the trees. "There's the cottage and no lights showing."

"I expect he's gone to bed."

"More likely he's down on the shore, playing his flute and thinking great thoughts in the darkness. Come on. We'll see what's doing."

They walked up to the house, and Guy thumped loudly on the low thick door. There was no answer. He knocked again, louder and longer. The result was the same : no movement, no light, nothing.

"He *must* be out," said Leslie. "He couldn't sleep through a row like that. What do we do now? Start walking back, I suppose. And me with this perishing blister the size of a football . . ."

"On the contrary. We shall wait here until he returns. All night if necessary. Just a moment, let's try the door. We may as well wait in comfort if possible."

He turned the handle and pressed inwards. "There. What did I tell you? Open house, and all comers welcome. Now, where's that light switch. Ah, here it is. Good God!"

"Stay just where you are, and join your hands behind your necks. That's the idea. We don't want any accidents, do we?"

Fanny was standing in the middle of the room with the .38 automatic directed at their stomachs. She was completely relaxed and smiling cheerfully.

"In case you feel like doing anything rash, there are two points worthy of notice. (a) I *have* remembered to release the safety-catch ; (b) This type of cannon makes a horrid big bang—and a hell of a gap in the scenery. And now, shall we get ourselves organised ? "

She pointed to a pair of upright chairs standing against the wall on either side of the dining-table. "Sit down on those, put your hands under your thighs and tuck your feet behind the cross-bars. Good ! And please understand that if you try any parlour-pranks, I shan't hesitate to convert you into a pair of colanders. I make myself quite clear ? "

"As crystal," said Guy. "And now what ? "

"We wait for Mr. Vervain. I make no apology for detaining you, as I gather that you share my own keen interest in *The Tears of Venus*."

"And then, I suppose, you offer us a poisoned banana ; or take another bash at us with a ten-ton motor-lorry ; or have us knifed and tossed into the bay."

"I'm afraid your point escapes me. Stiff-lipped British humour, I presume ? "

Sprawling in an armchair opposite to them, with an ungrudging display of this and that, she made a charming picture, except for the muzzle of her pistol which eyed them with a black unwavering stare.

"So that's your line," sneered Guy. "You prefer to ignore the dirty end of the game. However, I suppose even the toughest tomboys are apt to be a bit fastidious about cold-blooded murder."

"May I ask what you are talking about ? "

At this Guy's anger touched flash-point. "I suggest that this little joke is just about played out. If you choose to work for an organisation that specialises in sudden death, that's your affair. We all have to eat.

But you might at least have the decency to be frank about it."

Her monstrous, turquoise eyes scrutinised him quizzically through a curtain of cigarette smoke. Then she gave her ravishing little chuckle.

"We appear to be at sixes-and-sevens. The only organisation that I'm working for is *Parfums Baudelaire*. Not that I shall be working for them much longer. When I've got the formula for The Tears of Venus, I shall demand a directorship at least; or probably go into business on my own account."

Guy half rose to his feet and smartly sat down again as the pistol muzzle focused on his essentials. "But I don't understand. This is fantastic."

"Not at all," replied Fanny coolly. "Just quick wits and private enterprise."

"But how did you get in on it?"

"How does one get in on anything? By knowing the right people, of course. An old friend of mine, Jenny Bannister, recently married a chap called Henry Salt who's a secret agent in some comic outfit run by Sir Humphrey Clinker. He happened to mention in one of his letters that he'd met an old boy at San Felipe who'd invented a tricky new scent. So I thought I'd use my annual holiday to nip down here and see if there was anything in it."

She paused and smiled bewitchingly. "The rest was too easy. I spotted at once that you were after something, so I just tagged along in your slip-stream. It was that horrible tie of yours that put me on to Felix Vervain. And a spot of eavesdropping in his girlfriend's back-yard last night did the rest. In spite of my poor Spanish and your untimely interruption, I gathered much of interest from the exceedingly rowdy conversation between Consuela and that bus-driver playmate.

He seemed to think that she was entering into Mr. Vervain's experiments with an altogether excessive enthusiasm. By the way . . ."

"Yes?"

"Did you push those boxes on top of me intentionally, because if so . . ."

"No, no, I assure you," cried Guy, as the pistol swung towards him. "I . . . I slipped."

"And from what I hear, you slipped again shortly afterwards. Really, Guy! Not quite the sort of behaviour one expects from a Professional Negotiator. I'm extremely sorry I missed it."

"I couldn't help it," muttered Guy with an embarrassed glance towards Leslie. "It was that damn scent."

"Quite so. It seems that it really does do everything that Mr. Vervain claims."

She leaned towards him confidentially. "Tell me, just as a matter of interest, who are *you* working for? Lanvin, Guerlain, Patou?"

Guy drew himself up, in so far as he was able with his hands trapped under his thighs. "I am not employed by any commercial interest. I have the honour to be one of Sir Humphrey Clinker's secret agents."

Fanny's peal of delighted laughter broke off abruptly as she made another nasty gesture with her fire-arm. "Sit *still*! Unless you want a load of base metal bunging up your tubes."

"But this is ridiculous," protested Guy. "How much longer do we have to go on with this nonsense?"

"Nonsense? I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"But it's obvious. This is my affair. The best thing you can do is to get out at once and leave it to me."

Fanny patiently shook her head. "It is abundantly clear that one or other of us is stark staring mad. Are you seriously suggesting that I pull out and leave The Tears of Venus to you?"

"But of course. You must."

"What the devil do you mean?"

Guy took a deep breath and spoke with the weary emphasis of one addressing a mentally arrested adolescent. "Listen to me, my dear girl. The Tears of Venus is not a frivolous gew-gaw to be hawked around the cosmetic trade. It is a deadly invention of the highest international importance. It must be brought under control without an instant's delay, and put in safe keeping." He cleared his throat and proceeded with an air of weighty authority. "As the agent of Sir Humphrey Clinker, I am also, as I'm sure you will agree, *ipso facto* the representative here to-night of Her Britannic Majesty's Government, and therefore . . ."

"If you think I'm going to sit back and let you take-off with The Tears of Venus, then you're labouring under a painful misapprehension. I've run myself down to the knee-caps chasing after this stuff, and I intend to get away with it. I'm prepared to admit that there may be something in your argument, but that's for me to decide. There's a lot of come-back in this thing, whatever happens; and I mean to collect it."

"But you, a mere girl, can't take it upon yourself to make a momentous decision of this kind. I tell you it's a matter of world-shaking significance. It's . . ."

Fanny looked at him with frigid detachment. "When it comes to making decisions of world-shaking significance, I fancy that my credentials are quite as good as yours. I, at any rate, do not devote my leisure time to chasing naked women round continental hotels."

At this, Leslie intervened for the first time. Un-

daunted by the menace of Fanny's pistol, he raised his right hand and extended an indignant index-finger.

"You're a fine one to talk ! You with your bathing in the nude and . . ."

"Drop that gun, Miss Travavurse. Thank you."

Guy spun round on his perch and turned to stone. Standing in the laboratory doorway, covering the three of them with a German Luger, was the Hairless Catalan.

Followed by the two tough waiters from El Cortijo, he glided into the room with his silky cheetah's stride.

"You will all stand up and stay just where you are."

He flicked his left hand. "Carlos ! Pablo !"

A couple of minutes later, Guy was stumbling out of the cottage behind Leslie and Fanny, the muzzle of Pedro's Luger caressing his spine. Their hands were lashed behind their backs, and they were gagged and blindfolded by tight canvas bags jammed down over their heads.

A motor engine started up, and Guy was pitched off his feet on to a leather-covered seat. Fanny and Leslie fell in on top of him, the door slammed and the car lurched into motion.

"You and your blasted pistol," grunted Guy. "Why the hell didn't you take a crack at him ?"

Fanny's voice was muted and peevish. "How the devil could I ? It wasn't loaded."

12

"Good evening, Guy. A little behind time ; but better late than never."

Myra Sheath was standing fifteen paces from him in the middle of a big luxuriously furnished drawing-room. She was smiling like a voluptuous beast of prey, wearing a Ronsard dinner-gown of midnight-blue velvet which, as usual, was not so much a gown as a brilliantly designed back-drop for the shameless splendours of the famous bust.

With the customary hissing friction of silk-clad thighs she advanced towards him, raised a predatory hand and smoothed his rumped hair.

"There, that's better. I'm afraid Pedro has been a little rough." She looked over his shoulder. "And Mr. Spindle and Miss Traverse as well. What a pleasant surprise. Quite a family party."

"My God, what a fool I am," said Guy quietly. "What a blind, besotted idiot."

Myra patted his cheek. "Come, now. You mustn't take it too hardly. We all make mistakes sometimes. For a beginner, you've put up a very creditable performance. Your handling of the Flikflex girdle episode at the Gare d'Austerlitz was quite masterly. And the way you slipped out of that trap we laid for you yesterday afternoon was a lesson to us all. I confess I was quite irritated at the time. But as it turns out, you've been much more useful alive than dead . . ."

She held up her hand and smiled reproachfully. "No, no, please don't misunderstand me. The knife-work was Pedro's idea entirely. My intention was simply to knock you on the head and keep you out of the way for a while. But you know what these gipsy types are when they get warmed up; they never know where to draw the line."

She stepped back with a gesture of apology. "And now, when these somewhat over-zealous employees of mine have untied your hands, we'll have a little refreshment; followed by a nice quiet chat. I think it will be best if you all sit in a neat row on the sofa over there."

She dispensed sherry and cigarettes, dropped into an armchair facing them and gave them the third-degree burn. "There, now. Everybody comfortable? And, by the way, before we go any further, I do so hope that none of you will try to do anything . . . impetuous." She nodded towards the Hairless Catalan who was lounging in the doorway with his Luger at the ready. "Pedro is always a teeny bit trigger-happy; and this villa of his is very private, standing, as it does, in its own extensive grounds on the edge of the cliffs some three miles south of San Felipe. Any haphazard movements on your part, therefore, would be both fruitless and brief."

She paused to sip her wine. "I merely mention these facts in passing because I have rather delicate nerves, and I find sudden loud noises extremely disturbing."

"Your hint is taken," said Guy curtly. "And I'm getting a little bored with this conventional smiling-tigress line of conversation. I suggest we come to the point. What goes on?"

"Dear me. How abrupt you are. Scarcely the

smooth approach that one expects from a top-level Negotiator. However, since you insist . . . I want a little information "

" Well ? "

" I want the secret of The Tears of Venus. Or, to be more precise, I want the formula for the fixative. Mr. Vervain is being very obstinate about it."

" So you've got him too."

" Of course. When that bunch of boys chased Consuela into El Cortijo the other night, I began to take a keen interest in Mr. Vervain's activities. And when I heard that you were cultivating his acquaintance, my interest redoubled. Your remarkable joint experiment last night at the Hotel de la Playa left no room for doubt. It was reported to me immediately by the proprietor who, incidentally, is one of my most reliable agents. Naturally we were waiting for Mr. Vervain when he returned home at two a.m."

She leaned forward and patted Guy on the knee. " I don't want to seem catty, my dear boy, but lying in bed until eight o'clock in the evening is not the way to success in our line of business. I know you had a very busy night ; but Time and Myra Sheath wait for no man."

" You can skip the delicate irony. I'm listening."

" Very well. The situation is this : I've got Mr. Vervain ; I've got his original formula for The Tears of Venus ; and I've got his entire reserve stock of the stuff, four ounces in all. But I have not got the formula for the fixative, nor a sample of the scent with the fixative added."

" Ah ! "

" Quite so. The scent itself is undoubtedly a miraculous invention for . . . for parlour-game purposes. But for strategic purposes it is of little value. It's life

is too short. You may be interested to learn that, this afternoon, I personally carried out six separate tests, and I find that the effective duration of the unfixed scent is from three to four minutes—depending on the age and temperament of the subject.” She linked her hands behind her head and stretched languorously. “Plus the fixative, however, I fancy it lasts a good deal longer.”

“Too true,” muttered Guy.

She nodded. “I sympathise with you. Three to four hours, no? I’m not surprised that you over-slept.”

She crushed out her cigarette and sat up. “So you see my difficulty. I’ve got everything but the most important item: the formula for the fixative. That’s what I want. And that’s what I intend to get.”

“There’s no harm in trying, of course.”

“Aha! The celebrated Random nonchalance. You mean you won’t confide in me?”

“I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. I don’t know the formula.”

“Really, Guy!”

“I don’t know it, I tell you. Not that it would make any difference if I did, needless to say.”

Myra shrugged and turned towards Leslie. “Perhaps your colleague has other views on the matter. I have unlimited funds at my disposal, Mr. Spindle; and I am by nature a generous woman. In every way.”

Leslie inhaled with an audible hiss, clenched his hands on his knees and shut his eyes. “I don’t know anything about it. And . . . and if I did, I wouldn’t talk.”

“That’s the spirit, Les,” cried Fanny. “Stick to it!”

Myra ignored her completely and lay back in her chair. “Dear me. I was afraid of this. It’s always the same with you men: such incorrigible romantics, with

your notions about honour and patriotism and playing the game and so forth."

"You're wasting your time, said Guy coldly. "Neither Leslie nor I know anything about the formula."

"So you're sticking to that story?"

"It happens to be the truth."

"H'm. I wonder. However, we'll soon find out."

Guy sat up abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see presently." She nodded to Pedro. "Bring Mr. Vervain here."

In spite of everything, including the muzzle of Pedro's Luger in the small of his back, Felix was as debonair as usual. He perched himself on the arm of the sofa and twinkled down at Guy with his habitual good humour.

"Well, my boy, it seems that our little demonstration last night has aroused a degree of interest. Your friend Mrs. Sheath, in particular, appears to be vastly intrigued. Her enquiries have been most flattering—if a little repetitive. The ladies are always the same, I notice. They won't take no for an answer."

"You must allow us the weaknesses of our sex, Mr. Vervain," said Myra softly. "And you must forgive me if I return once again to the enquiries which you find a little repetitive. I mean, of course, the formula for the fixative for your remarkable scent."

Felix's jaw hardened, and the twinkle in his eyes gave place to a glint of anger. "My dear Mrs. Sheath, nothing pains me more than refusing a favour to a lady, especially a lady as beautiful and charming as yourself. But there are times, alas, when moral principle must take precedence over personal inclination. And this is one of them. I am a man of quiet and pacific temperament, to whom all forms of violence and

coercion are extremely distasteful. Had you approached me in a normal lady-like manner, I should have been more than delighted to satisfy your curiosity in every detail. Instead, you send a posse of gangsters to my house, who rifle my laboratory and kidnap me at the point of the gun. Behaviour of that kind is not the way to win my confidence. It merely succeeds, if you will forgive the phrase, in getting my back up—and keeping it there.”

He broke off to help himself to a drink and a cigarette. “Nor is that all. Besides finding your methods distasteful, I find your motives suspicious. Exactly why you’re so interested in *The Tears of Venus*, I don’t know. But, to put it bluntly, it’s clear to me that you’re up to no good. It is useless, therefore, to pursue the matter further.”

Myra stared at him through a haze of smoke. “That is your last word, Mr. Vervain?”

He folded his arms on his chest and raised his chin. “Yes, Mrs. Sheath, it is.”

She sighed profoundly. “You three gentleman place me in a very awkward position. Very awkward indeed. I have asked you for a little information, but you refuse to give it to me. I am afraid that I can see only one solution. I shall have to try persuasion.”

“By which, I suppose, you mean a spot of torture,” rasped Guy. “What do you favour? Hot cigarette-ends in tender places? Or splinters under the finger nails? Or our old friend, the dentist’s drill?”

“My dear Guy! I’ve told you once already this evening that I suffer from delicate nerves.”

“I beg your pardon. It slipped my memory. However, I don’t expect you to do your own dirty work. No doubt you can safely leave that to little baldilocks and his pals.”

Myra looked at him approvingly. "In moments of stress, there is a crisp directness about your style that is decidedly impressive. It was that, no doubt, which appealed so strongly to Sir Humphrey Clinker. Unfortunately, he seems to have overlooked the fact that a secret agent needs something else as well. Brains."

She walked swiftly across the room, spoke briefly to Pedro and stopped in the doorway. "I must ask you to excuse me for a few moments. I was very carefully brought-up, and if I must be inhospitable I prefer not to see it happening."

She disappeared into the hall, and Pedro ripped off a burst of brusque orders to his assistants, who brought in four very solid mahogany dining-chairs and set them in a row facing the sofa. Then he advanced with his dead-eyed snake's smile, his forefinger caressing the trigger of the Luger.

"You will sit on these chairs and keep quite still. Quickly! It does not please me to wait."

In a couple of minutes the four of them were pinioned helplessly, their hands lashed behind the chair-backs, their shins secured to the front legs.

Pedro stood back and looked them over. "You are quite comfortable, yes? Bueno!"

Then he stepped up to Guy and struck him brutally across the face. "I do not forget an insult, Mr. Random. Later, when the señora has finished with you . . ."

Myra's voice came from the doorway like a velvet whiplash. "Stop that, Pedro! I've told you before I won't have you playing your pretty little tricks on my guests—not until I've played mine. Get out there into the hall, all three of you. And stay there until I call you."

The door closed with a soft thud, and she slowly walked forward into the full light.

The overstrung silence was ripped by a piercing squeal from Leslie. For Myra was no longer wearing her Ronsard dinner gown. Now her sole garment was a peignoir of lilac-purple chiffon which, like a transparent cloud, served only to enhance the stunning majesty of the underlying landscape.

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed Fanny. "I flatter myself that I'm a fairly broadminded girl; but I'm damned if I've got room enough for all that."

Myra halted under the fabulous crystal chandelier suspended from the middle of the ceiling. "The gentlemen, I'm glad to notice, seem rather more appreciative; which, perhaps, is only to be expected."

"I've seen it all before," snapped Guy. "Several times. I'm more interested at the moment in whatever it is you're so carefully concealing behind your back. A thumbscrew, perhaps? Or a pair of red-hot pincers?"

Myra sketched a grimace of revulsion. "How you do keep harping on those nasty old-fashioned notions. For a man with twenty years' experience in the art of Negotiation you have an extraordinarily crude mind. But, since you ask . . ."

She extended her right arm. Lying in her palm was a bottle filled with amber-coloured liquid.

"The Tears of Venus!" whispered Guy.

"Exactly. Which makes your talk of thumbscrews and dentists' drills seem rather out of date, doesn't it?"

In a single lithe movement she deployed herself on the sofa, opposite to the row of chairs.

"Well, gentlemen, for the last time. You know what I want. The formula for the fixative. Are you prepared to tell me? Or must I use . . . persuasion?"

Felix watched her, appalled. "You don't mean . . . you wouldn't . . ."

"That is precisely what I do mean, Mr. Vervain.

As I said earlier on, this unfixed scent is perfectly satisfactory for parlour-game purposes. We have some four ounces of it here. Even if I have to renew the dose every three minutes, it will still last quite a long while at the rate of two drops per application."

"But you can't do that!" cried Guy. "It's inhuman. It's unthinkable."

She ignored him and continued looking straight at Felix, her fingers toying with the stopper. "Well, Mr. Vervain. You know precisely what this means . . . for you *and* your friends. Are you willing to talk? Or must I make you?"

Felix sat absolutely motionless, the sweat starting in beads on his forehead. "My friends cannot tell you the formula because they do not know it. And I shall not tell you myself—no matter what you do."

With slow, precise movements Myra drew the stopper from the bottle and parted the folds of her peignoir.

"I shall be interested to see," she said, "exactly how long it takes The Tears of Venus to dissolve your moral principles."

As the pale golden drops splashed into the deep white chasm, Guy and Felix reacted identically, cowering backwards with their eyes and mouths clamped shut, their nostrils pinched tight by intense muscular contraction. Immobile, unbreathing, they sat like corpses exhumed from a prehistoric tomb.

But Leslie, unwarned and unprepared, took the full shock. His eyes extruded from their sockets, a long gasping moan shuddered from his throat and he threw himself against the ropes that bound him like an infuriated panther smashing at the bars of its cage.

"Hold it, Les, hold it!" shouted Fanny. "It's only a drop of scent when all's said and done."

But Leslie was beyond all human aid. In a frantic

delirium of barbaric passion he jerked and bucked and wrenched at his shackles, the sweat pouring down his face, his breath whistling and hissing through his clenched dentures.

"For pity's sake, Les, pull yourself together! If you're not damn careful you'll slice yourself into rashes with those ropes."

She might as well have reasoned with a feather in a hurricane. A whimpering gabble started to pour from his lips, a gabble which increased in tempo and volume until it finally exploded in a falsetto yell of despair.

"Tell her, Vervain! Tell her! I can't stand it . . . I can't stand it any longer! . . . Let me go . . . let me go . . ."

He suddenly writhed and stiffened as if goaded by a nest of scorpions. Then, in a last frenzied convulsion, he collapsed unconscious, slumping over sideways against Guy and knocking the last vestige of wind out of his lungs.

Fighting against suffocation, Guy turned from red to puce, from puce to mottled purple. But the strain was more than human flesh and blood could bear. His lips split apart, his nostrils flared open and he gulped in a great gust of air.

The effect was instantaneous. He launched himself at Myra with such insensate fury that his chair pivoted on its front legs and he toppled over, burying his face in her lap.

"Random! What the hell do you think you're playing at?" cried Fanny. "Blind Man's Buff? Or Hunt the Thimble? Try to think of something nasty! Antique kippers or old man's socks or that disgusting pipe of yours . . ."

She broke off a Guy, with a superhuman effort,

heaved himself upwards and forced his chair back on to its legs. At the same time, Felix sagged down in his bonds, wheezing like a rat-riddled harmonium.

Myra lit a cigarette and sank back against the cushions. "Well, so much for the first dose. Your reactions were extremely interesting. Indeed, Mr. Spindle, I notice, is no longer with us. What is known, I believe, as a merciful release. Under his somewhat stolid exterior, he clearly harbours a lively—not to say volcanic—temperament. Though we must remember, in all fairness, that he has had no previous experience of The Tears of Venus, and so, perhaps, was not morally braced up to meet the impact.

"As for you, Guy, I thought your effort was really very praiseworthy; especially in view of your exertions last night which, in spite of fourteen hours' sleep, must undoubtedly have placed you at a disadvantage. Towards the end you slipped rather, but that wasn't entirely your fault. On the whole, I think Sir Humphrey Clicker would be proud of you."

She turned to Felix and surveyed him with undisguised admiration. "You, for your part, Mr. Vervain, are deserving of the heartiest congratulations. You performed the quite extraordinary feat of holding your breath for no less than four minutes. It was fascinating to watch, and I look forward to seeing you repeat the performance in the near future."

"You unpleasant bitch!" exploded Fanny. "If I had my way, women like you would be withdrawn from circulation and permanently incarcerated in state-controlled refrigerators!"

Myra smiled reprovingly. "Come, come, Miss Traverse. Manners, manners! If you go on like that, you'll make me think you're jealous."

She raised herself on the cushions and her voice

hardened. "Well, gentlemen, time flies. Are you ready to tell me what I want to know? Or must I persuade you further?"

Guy made no reply. His eyes were closed, his chin sunk on his breast. The colour had drained from under his deep bronze tan, leaving his face a livid mask. The only sign of life in his entire frame was a continuous twitching and shuddering of the flesh as if he were in the grip of some excruciating mystical ecstasy or a bad attack of malaria.

Felix alone found strength to answer. His voice was trembling but his tone was firm. "I tell you again. Random and Spindle don't know the formula. And you'll get nothing out of me."

"What an obstinate man you are, Mr. Vervain. You really mean that?"

"I do."

"Then I have no option but to resume our little experiment."

She stubbed out her cigarette, unveiled again the fabled frontispiece and picked up the bottle. "I must warn you, by the way, that from now on there will be no more breaks for rest and recuperation. I shall continue to apply the . . . er . . . pressure until I get what I want."

As the stopper began to slide out, with a faint sinister rasp, an arid whisper broke from Guy's lips.

"Tell her, Felix. For God's sake tell her. I can't stand any more. I'm done for . . ."

Myra paused and looked at him wide-eyed. "Why, Guy! I do believe that you're beginning to take a little interest in me at last. True, I haven't got *The Pilgrim's Progress* to compete with; but it's very flattering all the same."

She looked at Felix. "Well, Mr. Vervain? Do you

feel inclined to change your mind? Your friend Mr. Random seems quite anxious that you should."

Felix stared straight in front of him and shook his head. "Do your worst, Mrs. Sheath. I shall resist you to the bitter end."

"Very well, then. You've asked for it. And here it comes. All of it."

She made a swift serpentine undulation, and the chiffon peignoir floated down to the carpet like an eddying cloud of smoke. At the same time she drew the stopper and tilted the mouth of the bottle.

There was a moment of appalling tension. Then a low whistling wail burst from Guy's lips; a wail that relentlessly rose in pitch and intensity like the sound of a jet aircraft accelerating down the runway for take-off. And suddenly he did take-off. Under his last demented spasm of frustrated passion, the ropes securing him twanged like zither-strings. The heavy chair rose vertically off the carpet, hovered in mid-air and crashed over backwards. Guy's head struck the floor with a resounding thud.

Fanny's voice broke through the silence. "You'd better tell her, Felix. That's two of 'em out cold. It's sheer massacre. Give her the dratted formula, and to hell with it."

"You hear what Miss Traverse says, Mr. Vervain? And I must say I agree with her. Do you think you're really justified in forcing your friends to undergo such an ordeal? Even in the cause of your moral principles?"

Felix did not answer. Rigid and motionless, oblivious of all around him, he fought his terrible duel with the demon he had himself unleashed.

Myra leapt to her feet, her eyes flashing, her magnificent body quivering with rage. "This has gone on

quite long enough, Mr. Vervain. I want that formula and intend to have it. My patience is exhausted."

Thereupon, she poured a palmful of The Tears of Venus into her right hand, dashed it against her frontage and sprang astride Felix's knees. Winding her arms about his pinioned torso, she pressed her lips to his in a hermetically sealed kiss.

There was a hush like the silence of the tomb. Then, jerking his head backwards, Felix cracked wide open.

"Stop, stop! I'll tell you . . . I'll tell you . . . the formula . . . anything . . ."

Myra rose from his knees, returned to the sofa and reached for a notepad lying on the table at her side. She shook her head as she picked up the pencil.

"So much, alas, for moral principle. Another of my illusions shattered. And now, Mr. Vervain, if you're ready to dictate . . ."

"And that will be quite enough of that."

Standing in the doorway, with his customary insolent grin, was the swarthy young bus-driver. Tufts of cotton-wool protuded from his nostrils, and an evil machine-pistol was tucked against his hip, its muzzle focused on Mrs. Sheath.

He stepped into the room, clicked his heels and bowed. "Good evening, one and all. Henry Salt at your service."

13

SIPPING his post-lunchéon brandy, Sir Humphrey Clinker reclined in an armchair in Guy's drawing-room, nodding approvingly.

"Close work indeed. Just in the nick of time, and no mistake. What happened then?"

"Well, Consuecia was all for shooting the lot of them on the spot. In the end we compromised by tying them up and locking them in the cellar. They're probably down there still. Then we all loaded into Henry's bus and drove like crazy for the French frontier. As we had no passports and so forth, we had to abandon the vehicle and seep across the border after dark by a mountain track. The rest you know. Many thanks, by the way, for laying-on that special aircraft to bring us out. I, for one, was more than ready for a few home comforts."

Guy lit a cigar and gratefully inhaled the aroma of the Armagnac.

"An astounding story," mused Sir Humphrey. "Upon my soul, I never heard the like. I can hardly wait to meet Mr. Vervain."

"He'll be here presently. He's putting up with his old Harley Street colleague, Wally Penge. I told him you were lunching with me, and he promised to look in about three o'clock."

"Excellent. And in the meantime, Random, allow me to offer you my heartiest congratulations. You've

handled the job magnificently. The entire civilised world owes you a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid."

"Don't congratulate me, Sir Humphrey. Henry Salt is the man we have to thank. But for him, Myra Sheath would have got away with the whole bag of tricks. I must say I'd very much like to know what that young man has been up to."

Sir Humphrey shook his head ruefully. "I've been looking into that during the past twenty-four hours, and I'm afraid it's just another example of the sort of thing that happens all too frequently in my organisation."

"Go on. This sounds interesting."

"Well, I should explain that we have a widows' pension scheme in force. If an agent is married, and he loses his life in the course of his professional duties, his widow receives a nice little annual payment. Alternatively, she can collect a very substantial lump sum. Now Henry, like most of my boys, enjoys expensive tastes; and just lately, it seems, he found himself in grave financial difficulties. He'd actually been seen riding in a bus, and rude men with writs were breathing hotly on the back of his neck. He decided, therefore, to avail himself of the pension scheme. Before going off on a short routine job behind the Iron Curtain, he married a girl called Jenny Bannister, surreptitiously at a registrar's office. Next, he sent the cryptic message I told you about, to the effect that he'd got on to something of tremendous importance and was going to follow it up. Then he used one of our most reliable intelligence channels to send back to headquarters the fanciful account of his own death—stabbed in the back and tossed into the sea off San Felipe, et cetera."

"And, after a due interval, he proposed to return home and live happily ever after on his widow's pension?"

"Exactly. I gather he chose San Felipe because he'd been there once before, on holiday, and had already established a warm understanding with the girl Consuela. Through her, of course, he knew about The Tears of Venus. But he never appreciated the significance of it until you and Mrs. Sheath got to work."

"Well, he pulled the fat out of the fire in the end: I hope you won't be too severe with him."

Sir Humphrey smiled grimly. "I think Henry will receive sufficient punishment without any disciplinary action from me. With a wife on his hands, no pension, and Consuela to account for, I fancy he's going to have a pretty harrowing life for some time to come."

The doorbell trilled and Guy jumped to his feet. "That will be Felix. You're about to meet a very remarkable man, Sir Humphrey. I think you'll be impressed."

Twenty minutes later, Sir Humphrey gravely laid his hand on Felix's shoulder. "This is terrific, Mr. Vervain. Absolutely stupendous. As Random so rightly says, The Tears of Venus makes the H-bomb completely old-hat. The possibilities of such a weapon stagger the imagination. I must ask you to hold yourself available at a moment's notice during the next few days. I have arranged for you to see the Prime Minister at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning; and there will be a full meeting of the Cabinet in the afternoon, followed by a conference of the Chiefs of Staff." He smiled amiably. "As you see, Mr. Vervain, you're a man very much in demand."

Felix slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry if I seem ungrateful, Sir Humphrey, but I must tell you that all

your impressive arrangements are quite pointless. I should advise you to cancel them at once, and so prevent a lot of important people from wasting a lot of valuable time."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean that I have decided to go no further with The Tears of Venus."

"What!"

"I have decided to suppress it completely. My recent experiences have opened my eyes. I realise now that I have produced something which could easily bring about the total collapse of all civilised life. As the nuclear physicists have learned to their cost, mankind cannot be trusted to use their discoveries sensibly; and I will not take the responsibility of adding yet another weapon to the armament of doom which threatens this unhappy planet."

"Accordingly, I have destroyed the Borgia letter containing the original recipe; and the remnant of my stock, left over from Mrs. Sheath's experiments, I have disposed of, aptly enough, by pouring it down the W.C. The formula for my own invention, the all-important fixative, I never committed to paper. That, thank God, I had sense enough to keep in here." He tapped his temple with his forefinger. "And I am happy to say that I have already completely forgotten it."

Sir Humphrey sagged against the chimney-piece, his hands pressed to his eyes. "You mean . . . you actually mean that you've destroyed everything?"

Felix rolled the last of his brandy round his tongue and set down his glass. "Well, to be perfectly honest with you, I haven't. As a matter of fact, I have preserved a few drops—just in case of a personal emergency."

"Personal emergency? What the devil do you mean?"

"Well, I've always had an eye for a pretty woman," replied Felix, rising to his feet. "And, between ourselves, I'm not so young as I was."

He bowed with his customary roguish twinkle. "Au revoir, Sir Humphrey. Forgive me if I dash away, but Wally Penge and I are off for a quiet week-end with the trout."

Somewhat later Gvy escorted the shattered Sir Humphrey to the door. "Please forgive my hurrying you away like this, but I, too, am going down to the country this evening. I've promised to lend this flat for the next three days to Leslie Spindle and Fanny Traverse."

14

It was five o'clock of a late July afternoon, and the splendid gardens of Monk's Frisking Manor glowed under the brilliant sunlight.

From their lounge-chairs in the shade of the cedar tree, Sir Humphrey Clinker and his hostess, Hetty Salt, surveyed the pulsating stockade of variegated manhood surrounding Myra Sheath recumbent on a rubber mattress in two derisory wisps of satin-lastex.⁴

"What a fantastic story," said Hetty. "And to think that Felix is going to marry her—after all that. I was considerably shaken when he turned up with her yesterday and announced that they were engaged. But

in view of what you've just told me, I can only conclude that he has taken leave of his senses."

"Oh, I don't know. All that happened a year ago. We always tend to forget the unpleasant things and remember only the agreeable ones."

"Well, I shouldn't forget it if I'd been kidnapped and tortured and . . ."

"But you're not Felix. He's the first to admit that he has an eye for a pretty woman ; and, from what I hear, he got both eyes full, pressed down and flowing over, that night at the villa."

"Well, it beats me," insisted Hetty. "And I don't understand your own attitude, either. You tell me that she's the most dangerous secret agent in the business, yet here she is, roaming round England, completely free to come and go as she please. Are you also out your mind ? Or is it some tremendously subtle counter-espionage trick ?"

"Not all. There's nothing mysterious about it. Myra is succeeding me as head of my organisation."

"What !"

"Come, come. It's not so astonishing as all that. As you know, I've been running the outfit for two years now, and I've been wanting to retire for quite some time. Frankly, I find the work far too strenuous for a man of my age. When I finally put in my resignation, they asked me to recommend a suitable person to take over. I immediately suggested Myra Sheath. We contacted her, offered twice the salary they were paying, and she accepted like a shot. I've not the slightest doubt that she'll make a tremendous success of the job. In fact I really feel quite sorry for all my boys, especially those two fanciful young fellows, Basil Chancery and your nephew Henry. They'll have to start getting up for breakfast."

Sir Humphrey glanced around the company. "I don't see any sign of Felix. Has he gone out for the afternoon? I'm greatly looking forward to meeting him again."

"I expect," said Hetty, "that he's still in his room. I understand from Mrs. Sheath that he finds it necessary nowadays to rest as much as possible."

There was a sympathetic pause.

"A formidable woman," said Sir Humphrey at last. "But there was one chap who had the measure of her : Guy Random. How well I remember sitting in this very spot a year ago and watching him brush her off. From that moment I was convinced that he was just the man I needed : a man who could put sex in its place and keep it there. And how right I was. When their paths crossed at San Felipe, she did her all to sap his foundations. But he resisted her to the last. Even at the very end, starko and drenched with The Tears of Venus, she failed to pierce his defences. Leslie Spindle and Felix Vervain went to pieces. But Random sat there, as cool as you please, encouraging his colleagues and taunting her to do her worst."

Fanny raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Who told you?"

"It was in his official report on the case. Why?"

"I see. I just wondered."

"A splendid fellow," continued Sir Humphrey warmly. "I was sorely disappointed when he refused further service and went back to his Negotiating. I really must look him up again some time. We got on so well together."

"You needn't bother. He's here for the week-end."

"But why didn't you tell me! Where is he? I must have a chat with him at once."

"I haven't seen him since luncheon," said Hetty.

"I expect he's somewhere around. . . . Why, there he is, look! Just crossing the lawn."

Sir Humphrey raised himself in his chair and smiled fondly as he watched Guy stroll across the grass to the canvas swing-seat at the far end of the swimming-pool, extend himself at full length on the cushions and open a small brown leather-bound book.

He turned to Hetty. "You know, this is positively uncanny. Everything is just the same as it was twelve months ago. Our two selves sitting here, and Guy Random sprawling on his neck, reading, unless I'm much mistaken, *The Pilgrim's Progress*."

"Yes," said Hetty. "Everything is just the same. Including Mrs. Sheath."

Sir Humphrey looked round to see Myra rise from her mattress, thrust aside her hypnotised public and stalk around the edge of the pool.

"My God, Hetty, you're right. She's after him again."

"Good afternoon, Guy."

He slowly lowered his book, carefully marking his place with his forefinger.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sheath."

"May I join you in your shady corner?"

"If you wish."

He turned away, paused and looked up again. "And just in case you haven't noticed, allow me to point out that there are drinks on the tray beside you; also cigarettes and matches on the table in front of you. With this, he declined still further into the cushions and buried his nose in his book.

There was a pregnant hush. Then Myra leaned across the garden-table that stood between them.

"Guy . . ."

Silence.

"Guy . . ."

Silence.

"GUY!"

He jerked himself upright, swung his feet to the ground and slammed his book on the table. "Good God almighty! What is it now? One might as well try to read in a mad-house. Sheer bedlam!"

Her voice was molten molasses syrup. "Why are you always so horrid to me, Guy? I do so want us to be friends." "

He gave her a long, long look, folded his arms on his chest and took a deep breath. "Mrs. Sheath, the time has come to speak plainly. I am reluctant to do so, because in my experience plain-speaking is usually just another term for bad manners. But you force my hand, and I have no choice. You are a very beautiful, intelligent and seductive woman, and I am greatly flattered by your persistent attentions. But I must tell you here and now, and with all the emphasis at my command *that you are wasting your time.*"

She leaned still closer, giving him the lot : and now it was twelve months riper. "But why, Guy? Why? I don't understand."

He sighed and spread his hands. "Must we dwell upon the flatter? I, at any rate, find it extremely painful."

"Well, I do think you owe me an explanation. But I don't want to embarrass you. If something peculiar *did* happen in the night-nursery . . ."

"The only peculiar thing that ever happened in my night-nursery was when I stuffed a glass bead up my nose, and . . . however that's another story."

"Then why won't you be friends?"

He crouched forward and tapped the table with his

index-finger. "Very well. Since you insist, I'll tell you. I am a fit and able man, with half my life before me—and I don't intend to spend it in an invalid chair on Cap Ferrat. Not even with four square meals a day and tobacco-money."

He heaved himself back into the swing-seat and reopened his book. "And that, Mrs. Sheath, is that. And nothing you can do or say will persuade me to alter my mind."

"I wonder."

In the palm of her upturned right hand lay a tiny sealed glass ampoule, filled with pale amber liquid.

Guy cowered back in his seat with a cry of horror. Then he slowly relaxed, smiling cynically. "Come, now, Mrs. Sheath. No doubt we're all entitled to our little jokes. But that, unfortunately, isn't a very good one. You're sadly out of touch with the situation, I fear. Clearly, you are not aware of the fact that The Tears of Venus were turned off at the main a year ago. Our friend Felix, in one of his fits of moral principle, wiped out the whole thing."

"Not quite, Guy. Not quite. He kept a few drops, just a few—for an emergency."

"How . . . how do you know that?"

"Because I'm his emergency."

Her beautiful, merciless fingers closed around the ampoule. "And you're *mine*."

She stood up and nodded towards the house. "Are you coming quietly? Or must I persuade you?"

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